TERRA HARMONY
THE
PAINTED
MAIDENS
THE COMPLETE TRILOGY

The Painted Maidens Trilogy

A Complete set of The Rising, The Betrayed, and The Taking
Plus bonus short story 'How I Met Your Mother'

By Terra Harmony

Seventeen-year-old Serena is the youngest member of a dying race. The increasing acidity of the ocean is destroying her home, slowly eating away at the once thriving underwater landscape. But since the night of Serena's birth, it is an outside force that most threatens their dwindling population. Werewolves, who once served as protectors for mermaids in the Kingdom of the Undine, now seek to eliminate all who dwell in the ocean—and Serena is about to find herself right in the middle of the deadly conflict.

Given the title of Werewolf Liaison, Serena is determined to make things right for her people. When she ventures to The Dry, she meets Liam, the werewolf with hazel eyes, and her whole world gets turned upside down. As Serena discovers the real history between werewolves and mermaids, she is left wondering who her true enemies are.

"It was a great ride. I devoured every page and loved the whole thing through." *by Ariel Avalon, Book Blogger*

"This is a wonderfully unique story." and "I recommend this if you enjoy mermaids or werewolves with some great action, mystery and a bit of romance." *by Darker Passions Book Blog*

"The book is fast paced filled with action that keeps you on the edge of your seat till the very end, add in a little romance and mystery for the perfect balance. The author has written a beautiful story that sparks the imagination. I loved everything about the story and can't wait for the next one to see what happens to both Serena and Liam as their stories unfold." *by The Reading Diaries Book Blog*

The Painted Maidens Trilogy

By Terra Harmony

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Delving into the deep was not easy. I want to send a special shout out to all of my beta-readers who read and provided feedback on each of my Painted Maiden books. This series would not be what it is without you!

Table of Contents

The Rising, Book One
The Betrayed, Book Two
The Taking, Book Three
How I Met Your Mother, A short story
About the Author
More of Terra Harmony
More from Patchwork Press

The Rising, Book One

With every drop you drink, every breath you take, you're connected to the sea.

- Sylvia Earle

Chapter One

Claws skitter over loose gravel and Serena risks a glance over her shoulder. A mass of black fur stumbles over tangled hind legs, then goes sprawling into the bushes.

"I thought you were supposed to be faster than this!" Serena yells. Her laughter floats through the air like a melody, intensified by the quick thrumming of bare feet against the ground as she sprints away.

The hulking form bursts back onto the path, a spray of sharp branches and bits of leaves coming with him. Even on all fours, its head stands as tall as Serena. Red eyes lock onto her. His animalistic growl leaves no question that he is angry. Serena looks forward, digging into the ground with her feet for a faster run. The wind rips tears from the corners of her eyes. Breath comes in short bursts. Her lungs and the gills behind her ears pulsate, working to find oxygen where they can.

The trail curves ahead, and Serena teeters on the edge of the path struggling to keep from flying off herself into the bushes. When she brushes against sharp shrubbery, shallow cuts crisscross down her scaled legs like the sting of a jellyfish, etching into her skin.

Serena breaks through the tree line onto the soft sand and slows her pace. Hot breath tingles against the back of her neck; the werewolf is close. She hadn’t expected the beast to be even faster on sand.

He snaps at her, his jaw almost reaching her long, inky-black hair.

The greedy thing doesn't even wait until he has a sure kill. He swipes, tearing through armored scales on her calf, forcing Serena to stumble to her knees. Behind her, the werewolf leaps. Dropping down into a roll, she barely avoids its razor-like teeth. Sand sticks to her open wounds. Claws sink into her shoulders, and the beast rolls with her, unwilling to surrender his prey. In the split second he is on top of her, Serena manages to thrust

the wolf into the air with her legs, pain shooting through her calf in protest. The werewolf yelps as he spins head over tail toward the ocean. The sharp crack of a body breaking the surface of water echoes across the beach.

Rough waves topple over fur as he struggles to regain his balance. The ocean pushes and pulls, growing in strength, as if working against the wolf.

Serena forces herself to her feet and brushes sand from the midnight blue scales along her legs and waist. Although her breath is still coming in hard bursts, she cracks another smile watching the mighty creature thrown out of his element, and into hers. Further out to sea, past the werewolf struggling in the waves, she sees more of her kind. Their eyes grow wide, pinned on the beast. Finally, her teacher emerges to usher the group away. They disappear underneath the water after Serena receives one piercing glare from the teacher whose lessons she abandoned for a little fun in The Dry.

Serena's smile disappears. *I am in so much trouble.*

The werewolf drags himself out of the water gasping for breath, weighed down by his thick matted fur.

Skirting around the creature, Serena gives him a wide berth as she walks toward the ocean. Frothy waves reach out with promises of swallowing her whole. She succumbs to their grip and sinks into familiarity. Once she is bobbing up and down with the waves, she turns to look at the werewolf.

He shakes his fur, ridding himself of the salty sea water, then scans the surf. Their eyes lock, his flaring bright red again. He turns them toward the moon, lifts his snout in the air, and howls.

Chills crawl down the back of Serena's neck, goose bumps only held at bay by the warm ocean lapping at her shoulders. Serena cringes, then flicks her freshly formed fins, spraying water onto the hound. His howl ends with a sharp yelp as he stumbles back.

Serena turns, flinging her body up before plunging down again, diving into the dark water.

Chapter Two

Past the vivid pink and blood-red coral forest and over the cliff, Serena descends into her kingdom, The Deep. Moonlight shimmering along the ocean surface fades and the water grows colder. Serena sends out a series of high frequency clicks, then stops to listen for their echo. It is mating season for the sixgill shark, and they can get aggressive. The sound comes back to her. No sharks, just a large school of salmon closer to the cliff.

Another series of clicks and buzzes leads Serena to a group of her kind —a dozen Undine maidens that make up her caste. Their scaled bodies of burgundy, bright orange, deep red, and plenty of yellows and greens are as plentiful and diverse as the corals overhanging the sea cliffs.

The maidens wait in formation; two columns of six. Without their thirteenth caste mate, they look almost flawless. The group has been together since they began school, and each year the thirteen maidens move from one caste to the next. This will be their last year of school, as most have already reached their eighteenth birthday. Soon, they will enter The Choosing and be given a permanent position in Society.

Zayla, the Caste Master, swims up and down the column, her bioluminescent hair streaming out in all directions—an agitated mess. Serena takes a deep breath and emerges from the shadows—steeling herself for Zayla’s inevitable wrath. Zayla rushes forward in an efficient streamline of scales and fins, stopping just in front of Serena. The deep blue strands of Zayla's braided hair slick back tight against her skull under her own will. Scowling, the corner of her lips turn down in disapproval.

Motioning the entire column forward, Zayla blocks Serena until everyone else has gone forcing her to stay in the rear for the swim home.

Serena moves forward only after the rest of the Undine pass. Most stay within their cliques, bumping into each other in the currents. They laugh, scooping up jellyfish and flinging the stinging tentacles toward one another. Cordelia, one of the more popular caste mates, sends a jellyfish to her friend, Simone. Simone laughs, her scales flashing in bright red as she dodges the creature avoiding a stinging jolt.

Serena is forced to zigzag around the tentacles as the group moves forward. Her shoulders and arms are already scarred with faint white lines

from not evading some of the jellyfish during her years in the back of the formation.

Despite the obvious hazards, the back of the line isn’t so bad; there are no eyes on her. If Zayla were more astute, she would dole out a real punishment like sentencing Serena to join one of the cliques clustered in groups in the Great Hall, chattering about the upcoming Choosing, or carrying on about which male Undine in the King's Guard is worth a pairing.

The entire journey home Serena works to block out the hyper, overactive vibe of her peers, instead concentrating on the world around her. The ecosystem is far more welcoming than the Undine ever were toward Serena. It does not avert its eyes whenever she walks into the room. It doesn't stop mid-conversation when Serena is near, only to resume in hushed tones once she turns her back. Though these actions were never explained nor justified to Serena, she has long since accepted her fate as an outcast, choosing instead to focus on the world that surrounds Society.

She turns her head as she swims, emitting a series of whistles and clicks. The vibrations ruffle the scales of those ahead of her. Some glance back, annoyed, but most have learned to ignore her by now. The sounds return to Serena, and the underwater world shifts from blurry, darkened forms into sharp, focused shapes.

Rockfish loiter in and out of the kelp forest along the shore while the plants move, occasionally allowing shafts of moonlight to pierce deeper into the ocean. Where the bottom shallows out and rock changes to powdery white sand, candy-striped shrimp dart among sea anemones, immune to their sting. A brown and yellow decorated warbonnet peers out with large eyes from behind pink coral. The eel-like fish retreats as the caste column passes.

The caste moves around the northern edge of Vancouver Island, Canada and into the unrelenting Pacific currents of the strait between the mainland and the islands.

Serena's caste approaches the inconspicuous caves they call home. The currents keep most scuba diving Ungainlies away, but as they grow bolder in their underwater expeditions, the Undine have been forced into subtlety. The pillars that once stood outside the caves, along with other obvious

signs of inhabitance has since come crashing down or has been chipped away.

The columned line separates—each maiden drifting off to their families as the lessons conclude for the day. Only Zayla remains, gesturing for Serena to join her.

Serena bites her lip. Punishment for her adventure today will go beyond what Zayla can administer as a Caste Master. The King's Second will have to get involved. Serena sighs. This wasn't her first unauthorized trip to The Dry, but it is certainly the first time she's been caught.

After the briefest hesitation—all that Serena dares to give— she follows Zayla's golden tail flippers.

They wind through the corridors of the rocky seabed, small holes serving as windows lining the passageway. Serena never understood it. A hole in the rock, just to stare at more rock. At the age of sixteen, when orphans are allowed to leave the orphanage for their own quarters, Serena insisted that hers be an outlying cave, as far as possible from the mainstream of the rest of the Undine. It is deemed dangerous—the location is too far from the majority of Undine to be considered secure, but the worst Serena has to endure are curious eels or squids. Besides, this far out she isn't under the constant reminder that the whole of Society prefers to avoid her. Better to save everyone the trouble.

Zayla and Serena reach the center of the underwater mountain and angle their fins to travel up. The pressure in Serena’s chest decreases, just as it does before she surfaces near a beach. It is deceptive; there is no escape to the surface from inside the mountain.

The highest portion of the inner mountain is not underwater during low tide and, judging from the position of the moon when she left the surface, the tide has just begun to recede. The king will have left, retiring for the night. It is said he sustained an injury so great he is unable to take his human, the Ungainly, form. He cannot walk away from the throne, he must wait until the tide comes in to carry him away. Always refusing to be carried by the King's Guard, his reign over the Great Hall is regulated with the tide.

Serena watches as Zayla's scales sink into the smooth skin of her legs, which reveal themselves as she uncrosses them. Zayla kicks the rest of the way to the surface, Serena moving aside to dodge the fizzy bubbles amidst clumsy feet.

Zayla surfaces first, her hair losing its glow. She leaves enough scales above her skin to cover herself from knee to neck. More scales equal more formality, and the pair are about to enter the King's Court. Here, everyone is almost fully scaled. Glittering, diamond-shaped armored plates reach up to their chins—and in some cases, even cover the sides of their faces.

One by one, the scales below Serena’s knees quickly retract, copying Zayla's dress, as is customary when following a superior. The receding scales leave behind small trickles of watery blood on her legs. The maidens cross wet sand, then hard rock. The narrow entrance, chipped open by Society's ancestors several thousand years ago, leads them to the Great Hall; there are no doors here.

Unable to speak underwater, Serena expects a mouthful from her Caste Master as soon as they emerged from the deep into their caves. But Zayla continues to stride straight toward the Great Hall, eyes forward. Her silence is far more disconcerting than a lecture.

Walking under the arches of the cave, the Undine maiden's eyes adjust to what little light the shimmering minerals give off above them.

Zayla looks up and falters. Her hesitant steps almost cause Serena to walk straight into her back. Serena peers around Zayla's shoulders to find herself under the scrutinizing eyes of King Merrick.

The king's eyes flit from Serena to Zayla, who tenses for a brief second, then curtsies. Serena remains still. Behind the king stands Nerin, her hand resting on top of the throne chair. She holds the official title of King's Second and has been by his side since before Serena was born.

She bends to whisper into the king's ear. Both their eyes dart to Serena, scanning the fresh crisscrossed cuts on her legs. It is evidence of her jaunt in The Dry.

"Curtsy to the king!" Zayla hisses.

The king holds up his hand. His voice booms through the cave. "She is not in the wrong, Zayla. We are not holding formal court."

Zayla's back goes erect at the rebuke. Drops of salty water fall from the stalactites above; the hollow echo of the drops hitting water at the back of the cavern punctuate his point. Not even the King's Guard is present, and the only council member here is Zayla herself. Serena has been coming to the Great Hall her entire life, and she has not once seen it so empty. When every Undine is summoned, ninety-seven members of Society in all, they have to stand shoulder to shoulder in order to fit.

Crossing her arms, Serena rubs her own shoulders, then looks tentatively at the king.

"What brings our youngest Undine and her Caste Master here at this hour?" he asks.

Serena notices the dark circles under his eyes. It is a stark contrast to the pale skin on the rest of his face. She wonders if he has chosen to stay in his chair for more than just this moon.

Zayla clears her throat. "I wish to speak with Nerin, regarding the excursion with my caste."

Adjusting in his throne, the king looks at Zayla. His large tail fins drape over the chair and rest on the rocky ground, waiting for her to continue.

Zayla pulls her shoulders back, glancing at Serena. Her hesitation is costing her; every moment spent constructing an accusation in her head decreases the impact of the story.

Serena steps forward, partly blocking Zayla. "On our trip to The Dry, I disobeyed orders to stay with the caste and engaged with a werewolf."

Nerin's mouth drops open, and the king bangs his fist against his armrest. "A werewolf?"

They both turn to Zayla.

"Did you miscalculate the moons?" the king asks.

Zayla is forced to step to the side to be seen. "I most certainly did not," She says, pressing her lips together.

Serena has to stifle a smile at Zayla's wide eyes. Because the moon regulates Undine life, such an accusation is a low blow to Society's only teacher.

"Besides," says Zayla. "I cross-checked with Evandre."

The king and Nerin exchange a glance. Certainly the Head Scientist couldn't be wrong.

"But for whatever reason, the wolf was there," continues Zayla. "I saw it with my own eyes. And Serena taunted him! She brought him straight to the group. I had to recede, leading the rest of the girls to safety."

The king's eyes snap to Zayla. "You left one of your students—one in the Temporal Caste, no less—to the claws of a werewolf?"

Temporal Caste. Serena wants to groan out loud at the phrase. Her entire life, this is what Serena and her classmates are to Society. The Temporal Caste: the final graduating class. They are the youngest Undine

and none have been born since. The excursion was almost cancelled because the risk of losing one of the remaining generation was too great.

Zayla stumbles over an excuse. "I had…had to get the rest of the girls to safety. Away from The Dry and past the breaking waves, down to the coral."

Nerin finally steps forward. "Since when do werewolves go past the breakers? You should have sent those girls on and helped the one that actually needed you!"

Serena raises her hand.

Nerin's mouth snaps shut as they all turn their attention to her.

"This werewolf did go past the breakers," she says.

"He did?" The king leans forward, cheeks flushing.

"Yes, well, only because I threw him there. He didn't go willingly…" Serena trails off. The king's sharp blue eyes bore into her.

Before she can speak again, Zayla does. "I motion for a trial."

The words act as a shockwave, thundering through Serena's chest, blossoming heat up to her cheeks.

Zayla takes a step forward. She says it again, speaking louder. "A trial for Serena Moon-Shadow."

Serena shivers as her full name echoes across the cavern. It sounds odd, foreign almost. There are no other Moon-Shadows in Society. She is an orphan; the Moon-Shadow name is hardly ever spoken.

"Charges?" asks the king.

"Absconding."

The charges roar through Serena's head. Absconding; leaving the borders of Society without permission and interfering where the Undine do not belong. The crime puts all of Society at risk, and it is punishable by death in the most extreme cases.

Nerin gives a nervous laugh and licks her lips. "I hardly think—"

"I have proof of other instances," interrupts Zayla.

Serena watches the king lean back in his chair. His fingers stroke the end of his bronze armrest. The metal is etched with designs from the ancients. The same drawings, only on a much grander scale, once graced the pillars outside their caves. Swirling designs and short phrases in the ancient language depict a bustling empire of Undine life. Now the only evidence of such life rests underneath the heavy arms of the king.

No one speaks while he thinks, and it gives Serena the chance to get her own pulse under control. She slows her ragged breathing down, keeping it in time to the echoes of dripping water.

The king comes to a decision. "Charges must be announced during Assembly. In two moons, we hold another. You can bring the motion then—if you still feel you must." His words are short and clipped as he glares at Zayla.

She shrinks back. "Yes…my king." She curtsies, keeping shaking hands clasped behind her back.

Eyes wide, Serena remains still. Despite the blood thundering through her veins, she can't bring herself to move. *Absconding.* The accusation is a betrayal by her own Caste Master, the woman who has taught her since she was a young calfling.

The king waves his hand, and Zayla turns to leave. When Serena doesn't follow, Zayla puts a hand on her arm and pulls. The Caste Master's touch burns. Serena yanks her arm free, making it clear she can see herself out of the Great Hall.

"Zayla…" calls Nerin, interrupting the escalating exchange. "Serena is not to return to her caste for the time being. As you are the accuser, it would be a conflict of interest."

Zayla nods, her eyes flitting over Serena. Serena pauses a second longer, forcing herself to look away from Zayla. Instead, she looks at the king. His forehead is creased, and Serena can't tell if it is from anger or worry. His fingers no longer stroke the armrest, but he grips it tight, his knuckles white. Turning, Serena follows Zayla out the door.

Chapter Three

Turning down one of the closest corridors to the Great Hall, Zayla heads toward her cave. She won't have to go far—the higher the standing in Society, the closer to the Great Hall your cave resides. Greedy eyes watch the comings and goings of King Merrick, and are the first to hear any news.

"Twenty years, Serena. Twenty years I've taught—twelve with you—and never has a student shown such disregard for my rules, for the safety of her own caste mates, and for the well-being of the whole of Society for that matter!" Zayla does not look over her shoulder at Serena as she talks. Nor does she mention Serena's safety, or why she even did it in the first place. "Thirteen left." Zayla shakes her head. "I used to have hundreds of students, and now there are only thirteen of you."

The hallway splits. In one direction the water is ankle deep and still rising. The other direction is dry; even high tide won't touch most of it. Zayla pauses, her hands in tight fists by her side.

"Apologies, Caste Master," mumbles Serena. "I would never intend for harm to come to you or my caste mates."

"As the last and final graduating students, the Temporal Caste has proven to be difficult for me. Because of the constant attention Society gives them, they have become spoiled and bratty." Zayla's shoulders sag just a bit. It is the same action Serena has observed after classes are done each day and the caste is leaving to go home. "But not you, Serena – you were never like them."

Serena looks at Zayla, eyes wide. She has been told as much her whole life, but this is the first time it has been depicted as a good thing.

"You disappointed me today, Serena." Zayla speaks softly, but the weight of her words thunder through Serena's chest.

"As you say." Serena is barely able to squeak out the customary phrase.

The Caste Master finally turns, looking down her nose at her student. "I'll speak no more on the subject. Not until the trial, at least. Have a good night."

Watching Zayla turn down the dry, darkened corridor, Serena's nerves calm just as the glittering gold scales adorning Zayla's back blink out of sight.

Serena turns in the opposite direction and trudges through ankle deep water, following the tide to her cave. When she enters, water still covers the lower half of the room. It is so far from the Great Hall that the tide never fully recedes. In order to sleep in Ungainly form—preferable because it allows a deeper rest—Serena has to lie in a small cove carved in the wall close to the ceiling.

What few personal items she has are in a dry box, lashed down to withstand the currents that invade her space during high tide. Inside the box are several tools, a set of small knives, notebooks, a microscope, bracelets, and one necklace passed down from her mother. Serena has yet to wear any of the jewelry. As the only pieces she has left of her mom, there is no sense in risking losing them.

Serena walks past the dry box and kneels in front of a series of crab traps lining the floor at the end of the cave. Inside the traps are algae and kelp, plus a host of individual jars holding sea urchins and oysters. She bends to inspect her experiments and what little light the cave opening allows winks out.

Turning, Serena finds a dark form in the doorway. She scowls. "You're blocking my light."

The silhouette moves to the side, and a large guard with light brown scales comes into view.

"Oh, how I've missed your warm greetings," says Ervin.

Serena smiles and stands. "Hi Ervin, I'm sorry. It's been a rough day."

He scans the damaged scales on her legs and the claw marks at her shoulders. "So I see."

Serena frowns, then brings forward more scales to cover the wounds, hiding them from her former orphanage friend. Ervin was three castes ahead of her and, like Serena, he has very little to say. Their preference for each other's company grew until Ervin was selected for the King's Guard, as all males are simply due to the fact there are so few of them. Guards are on call through low tide and high, leaving very little room to participate in Society.

"What are you doing here, Ervin?" She has barely seen him since his Choosing Ceremony.

He doesn't answer, only brings his sharpened trident to attention next to his side.

"You are here to guard me?" Her eyes flash and cheeks heat.

He nods, shrugging his shoulders and relaxing his grip on his trident once again. "Nerin and the king didn't seem too happy with you."

Serena plops down next to the cages, peering in at the red and purple spiny sea urchins. "Neither was Zayla."

"Maybe not the best time to fall from their graces, right before The Choosing?" Ervin walks into the room, sitting on Serena's dry box.

She frowns. "Trust me, it wasn't very much of a fall—not when I am already viewed as so far beneath them."

Ervin stands his trident in front of him, spinning it slowly on its stem. "Tonight, with the werewolf…" he clears his throat. "Cordelia was—"

"Cordelia was safe," Serena interrupts. Her eyes snap to him. "Are you mad that I put her in danger?"

"I don't believe Zayla's accusations that the danger was imminent—for them, anyway." Ervin looks at Serena, sighing. "I'm glad you are okay, but please don't do that again."

Serena turns back to the next jar of sea urchins. This one has been exposed to elevated carbon dioxide. "I didn't know the wolves would be out tonight. The moon isn't full." She taps on the CO_2 canister, stolen from a tour group of bicyclers. Poisonous CO_2 bubbles slide from the canister into the jar.

"What are you doing?" asks Ervin.

She leans back, wrapping an arm around one knee. She points to the first jar. "This is my control group. There are plenty of eggs floating along the surface of the water."

He leans in, squinting at white specks. "Yes."

She points to the next jar. "I've elevated the CO_2 in this one. The levels are just slightly higher than that outside our caves right now."

"There are only a few eggs in that one," says Ervin.

"Exactly," says Serena. "And it's where our ecosystem is headed."

He sits up straight again, resuming the spinning of his trident. "Is this what you spend your time doing after school each day?"

She shrugs. "Sometimes I go collecting for my experiments." She turns her attention to the next set of crab traps. Oysters. "At first, it was just a hobby—something to do. But then I began to notice the coral at the outer edge of our kingdom withering away into grey skeletons. I wanted to find out why."

"And thus the hobby becomes an obsession."

Serena rolls her eyes. "We all have our obsessions, Ervin." She runs her hands down the shells of the oysters, looking for miniscule cracks or erosion, but it is difficult to tell with her naked eye. Algae growing through the square spaces in its crab trap brushes her arm, as if asking for attention. She smiles, turning to the reddish-brown plant, running her fingertip along the flat, branching arms and rounded ends. Soon she will have to select one of the trunks to expose to elevated carbon dioxide, mimicking ocean acidification. She sighs. Killing her experiments is never fun.

Ervin stands and opens the dry box, snapping Serena from her concentration. He moves aside notebooks and instruments, finally selecting a pair of tools. He turns to Serena, placing them in her open palm. "Absconding, huh?"

The word rolls around her head, crashing into and burying thoughts of her experiments. Serena turns the tools over in her hand. "The king and Nerin also weren't that happy with Zayla. Maybe they won't let her accusations go to court. Maybe they just want to dismiss Zayla's claim at Assembly in front of all of Society so no one dares bring it up again." It is a comforting thought, but the unease in the pit of her stomach doesn't lessen. It sinks like heavy rocks in soft sand.

Ervin raises an eyebrow. "In the last trial that involved absconding, the maiden was found guilty and was sentenced to death. She keeps appealing, so she is still alive, locked away in the lower caves."

"Not helpful, Ervin." Serena barely remembers the trial. It was the year of her first caste. She turns, scaling the wall to a small cove aided by a boost from Ervin. There isn't enough room to sit up, so she lays down, tools at the ready. Each night, she chisels out a little more space for her sleeping area. The monotonous work helps her process the day.

"I'll be standing guard tonight. Sleep well, Serena Moon-Shadow." Ervin turns to leave.

Serena turns on her side. "You should just talk to her, Ervin."

He pauses, shoulders almost rising up to his ears.

"Want me to talk to her for you?"

He turns, eyeing Serena over his shoulder. "Don't meddle, Serena. Leave Cordelia out of it."

She smiles, then lies flat on her back, tools at the ready. As Ervin takes his post outside her door, she begins to hammer at the rough ceiling of her

cove. Bits of debris and dust fall into her space. High tide will wash them away in a few hours with help from the harsh currents that surround Vancouver Island. They not only keep the Undine safe from Ungainly divers, but they also polish and smooth the rock that cradles Serena in her sleep.

Maintaining her Ungainly legs, Serena brings forward her scales to help keep her warm through the night. She grits her teeth and the stinging sensation subsides. Like brushing against an anemone, the more she manipulates the scales, the less they hurt.

* * *

A few hours later, Serena wakes to water lapping at the wall just a few inches down from her sleeping cove. She stretches, knuckles and toes hitting solid rock. She rolls over, fingers brushing over rock to find her tools before they can float away. The unstoppable tide moves in, crawling into her cove and lifting her out of bed. Cold envelopes her legs and the smell of salt and bitter seaweed assaults her senses, waking Serena better than the prick of a stingray. She crosses her legs, melding them together tighter and tighter until fins are formed. Her gills emerge, and she dips into icy ocean water.

A flash of light brown scales outside her cave catches her attention and she remembers Ervin spent the night watching over her. Serena stows her tools back in the dry box, and swims through her cave opening. Not one, but two guards stand duty. Serena bows her head toward Ervin.

Instead of bowing to return the courtesy, Ervin brings his trident to attention. The three-horned, golden weapon catches a flare of sunlight filtered through the sea.

I see we have disposed of the pleasantries. The gills along Serena's neck flare.

The second guard member moves in front of her. Offering an apologetic smile, he lowers his trident instead of bringing it to attention. Narrowing her eyes, Serena crosses her arms. She finds it hard to trust someone who offers her a smile so readily, especially when offered by Second in Command to the King's Guard. With his lips slightly parted in that lingering smile, not to mention his ranking in Society, his time is surely better spent with any other maiden.

He cocks his head sideways then nods, motioning up to the surface. Serena follows reluctantly, rising just until the tops of her shoulders emerge.

"If only we could speak underwater," he says.

"Some creatures can," Serena says. "The intelligent ones, anyway." She wants to swallow her words as soon as they leave her mouth.

"Are you claiming the Painted Maidens to be…unintelligent, Serena Moon-Shadow?" His sea-green eyes twinkle like those of a playful seal.

She glances beneath the glass surface of the water, Ervin is choosing to stay below. "Why are you here, Kai Forest?"

"Kai will do just as well, Serena." He runs one hand through ash-blonde hair, water droplets clinging to the end of long tendrils.

"As you say," says Serena.

He flashes her a smile again. "What I *mean* to say is, there is no need to be so formal. I am to be one of your escorts." In a culture full of rigid ceremonies and proper traditions, Kai has a reputation for breaking the humorless, stone-faced bearing common in guard members. Serena was always intrigued by his antics, but from a distance. He makes the drab, elongated Assembly sessions bearable by making faces in court—or performing an exaggerated swagger while on patrol just to elicit the smile of a brooding maiden.

"Escort me where, exactly?" Serena asks.

"Not to your Caste Master, for sure. The king said it was a conflict of interest. Ready?" he glances out at the open ocean, a flicker of a spark in his eye as though some great adventure awaits.

"No classes?" Serena manages to return the smile. "Escort away." It would do her and Zayla well to not have to see each other today.

Serena dips below the surface to follow Kai, and Ervin takes his place beside her. She keeps glancing at Ervin’s fins as they swim. There are scars, more than she remembers during their time growing up. He was not very coordinated to begin with, his extra weight more often than not dragging him down. Orphaned Undine are fed well, of which Ervin took full advantage until his Choosing. Now, his frame is wider and muscles wrap around his arms, chest, and abdomen.

The awkward movement of his tail is still there. His swish to the left is slightly crooked and he has to compensate on the right just to maintain depth. The King's Guard can't change everything about him. Serena moves

to his left side, swimming close. This way, Ervin is forced to keep his tail movement on that side narrow—and correct.

Serena looks at him sideways, a wry smile on her face, but Ervin keeps his eyes steady forward.

Circling the island to the remote western side that lays bare to the Pacific Ocean, Serena understands where they are headed.

The archives.

A cycle of bioluminescent glow bursts through her hair, and her fins turn jittery.

The history of the Undine is kept in a large cave carved underneath the western Canadian continent. Books, both recent and centuries old, stack the shelves, far out of reach from the salty clutches of high tide. Suddenly, Zayla's accusations don’t seem so bad, if it means Serena gets to spend the next few days here.

In front of her, Kai angles for a deep and quick descent. The only entrance to the archives is a tight, constricted passageway, so narrow in places even the thinnest Undine have difficulty maneuvering their fins. Pure speed and brute force is the only way to get through; the passageway has been known to leave its mark on travelers.

Gesturing for Ervin to go next, Serena waits after he disappears into the murky tunnel. There is a chance he might get stuck and will need a push through from behind.

She counts to ten, then follows. Streamlining her scales, Serena uses a strong surge of the undercurrent to gain speed. The passageway is dark, but Serena has long since memorized the intricacies of the corridor. Right shoulder up and back here, duck the head there, slow down for the sharp curve ahead. In one rare instance where space allows, Serena moves her hands in front of her, preparing to push Ervin's wedged body.

To complete the last section, Serena picks up speed. The dim glow of the inside cavern comes into view and she realizes Ervin is not stuck at all. She spreads her fins wide, but it does not slow her down in time. She bursts through the surface, emerging almost all the way to her tail. Water sprays, coating the walls and blurring the light. Serena struggles to maintain vertical balance as she bobs twice. Settling, she treads at the surface as seawater drips off the mirror that reflects sunlight through a small tunnel above, lighting the archive's entrance once again.

Ervin and Kai both stand on the ledge. They have already transformed, their scales gone, donning the required robes in order to enter the archives. The rough material scratches bare skin, but it helps absorb any excess water his body still might have.

Kai smiles down at Serena. "Show off."

Next to him, Ervin is frowning. Serena returns the scowl, then looks at Kai's legs, bare from the knee down. It is an uncommon sight in Society. She blushes, turning her head away.

"What's the matter?" Kai asks. "Never seen legs before?"

"Of course I have." Her words are short and clipped—harsher than she intended. "It's just…I've never seen *your* legs before."

Serena swims to the ledge, ready to pull herself out. She glances up at Kai and admires his creamy skin wrapped around his bulging calf muscle. A lone, crystal-clear drop of water slides down the side.

Serena looks up as Kai clears his throat. He raises an eyebrow.

Tightening her grip on the rocky ledge, Serena fights back the flush in her cheeks as she refocuses her eyes in front of her. She retracts her own scales; all of them, and feels the cold of the ocean seeping between her toes.

"Do you mind turning around?" she asks.

Bare legs are reserved for nights of the full moon, and only for members who are chosen for mating—something that has not been done in a very long time. Ankles and calves can lead one's thoughts to what transformations take place higher, between the legs.

Serena shakes her head. She brings forth scales up and down her legs, then retracts them again. The slight pain helps to distract her thoughts.

Ervin tosses a robe over to Serena and it pools into folds of material on the damp floor. He and Kai turn around to slip on the padded boots provided for walking amongst the archives.

Pulling herself the rest of the way out, Serena's feet touch hard rock. She takes two long strides to the remaining robes and quickly slips on a dry one. She usually goes through these motions alone, so having company is uncomfortable. Turning, she ties the sash around her when she realizes Kai is staring. Her hands drop, and she slips on her own boots.

"I assume you are to escort me inside," she says, gesturing to the arched entrance.

Kai closes his mouth, nods, and leads the way.

Chapter Four

There are certain rules involved in entering the archives, many of which are unforgiving enough to deter most Undine from visiting—which is why the archives easily became Serena’s second home.

All scales must be retracted. To accomplish this is a painful, tedious experience for most. Yet Serena visits so regularly that she shows her second skin almost without thought.

As they enter the large, underground cavern, Serena watches the pair of guards out of the corner of her eye. Kai's chin lifts to the impressive display of hard-backed books crawling up the wall, and his hands brush the thick columns etched with pictures of Undine history as he walks by. They hold up the crushing weight of earth and trees resting on top of the cave.

Serena reaches toward the etchings with her fingertips. They remind her of what the entire kingdom might of looked like a hundred years ago. She takes a deep breath in and can feel the muscles in her shoulders relax.

The Records Keeper, Mariam, is perched on top of a ladder leaning against one of the columns, fiddling with a mirror that reflects light over the catalogues—the most important source of light in the entire archives. The archives is a register of all the books in the Undine library, including the king's own personal library, which is set off in a restricted room.

Flickers of light shine against what few scales show on Mariam's arms. As far as Undine colors go, the deep brown shade of her scales is rather unremarkable—a phrase Miriam has used to describe her own coloring. To Serena, the shade comes across as wholesome and genuine as opposed to the flashy gold that Zayla flaunts as she accuses Serena of absconding.

"I'll be down in just a minute!" Mariam calls as the ladder wavers.

Ervin wraps his hands around the bottom rungs, steadying it while Kai continues to gaze at the books.

"How many times have you been in here?" Serena asks him.

Kai looks at her. "Enough. Why?"

Serena shrugs. "You seem to enjoy it—more than most, anyway."

"Our visits are required every tenth high tide, at minimum." Ervin interrupts, glancing at Serena. "During our rounds."

A screech from above draws all of their eyes up. Mariam has leaned too far out. Her body balances between the ladder and open air, her arms waving in tight circles. Another gasp, and the Records Keeper falls. Serena freezes to the spot, watching in horror as Mariam's robe flaps through the air. The sound of pulsating fabric grows louder as she descends, directly over Serena.

Pulled away, Serena twirls once then finds herself surrounded by strong arms, the side of her face pressing into Kai’s broad chest. Behind her, the flapping material also comes to a sudden stop. She turns around, eyes wide, expecting the worst. Instead, she watches Ervin set Mariam carefully down on her feet.

"Thank you so much Ervin," Mariam says, her hands trembling. She pats his shoulder, then tugs down on her robes.

Serena takes in a shaky breath and Kai clears his throat. Realizing she has a white-knuckled grip on Kai's robe, Serena releases her grasp and smooths out the material.

"Sorry," she says.

He shakes his head once. The smile is gone from his face, but not his eyes—and he continues to look at Serena as if there is more to say.

Serena remembers herself. "I am grateful for your protection," she nods, bending her knees in a semi-curtsy.

The corners of his mouth turn down, disappointed by the formality.

"Everything okay?" A maiden steps out from the shelves of books.

"Sasha—I'd nearly forgotten you were back there," says Mariam. "I just had a little fall. The longer I am out of water, the clumsier I get. If Ervin hadn't been here, we'd be in need of a new Records Keeper sooner than I thought." Mariam winks at Serena.

Serena crosses her arms. *She almost fell to her death, and she is already joking about it.*

"What were you doing up there?" Sasha asks as she moves to help Ervin straighten the ladder. Recognizable by her bright orange scales, Sasha Sunbeam—along with her sister and mother— are the only maidens to sport the vibrant color.

Serena looks up, walking over to the pair. "Plants sometimes grow over the holes, blocking out the sunlight."

Ervin stares up into the ceiling. "How do you get rid of them?"

Serena and Mariam exchange a glance, eyebrows raised. Neither wanting to reveal that Serena often makes trips into The Dry just to clear out plants.

"Oh, these things usually work themselves out," says Mariam. "We'll have to endure a few days of low light." She makes a pointed glance at Serena.

Though Ervin misses the exchange, Serena isn't sure that Sasha did.

Serena will have to make another trip soon. Hopefully this time without werewolf interference or any unwanted Undine onlookers—Serena isn't sure which is worse.

"Anyway, Sasha arrived with instructions from your Caste Master." Mariam motions to a table stacked with books.

"In lieu of lessons for the day…" Sasha says, trailing off. "Sorry."

"She is giving me homework?" Serena walks over and runs her finger down the spines. This isn't the first time the hard covers have been under her touch. Werewolves. They are some of the least decorative volumes in the archives, as if the ancients were trying to disgrace the species through deprivation of jewels and elaborate etchings. "Is this my punishment?" she asks.

"Punishment for what happened at our excursion?" Sasha asks, coming up alongside Serena.

Serena looks at Sasha, one of her caste mates, out of the corner of her eye. Amidst a caste that only ever displayed indifference to Serena, at least Sasha was kind, always making sure to greet Serena before the lessons began.

"Yes," Serena mumbles. "The king was not happy."

Mariam shrugs. "I don't see how it can be a punishment. You've already read—"

"Enough to know this will take quite some time to finish." Serena cuts off Mariam, looking over her shoulder at Ervin and Kai who are inspecting the ladder. She motions to the hole of depleted sunlight, and Mariam nods back.

If Serena can sneak out without catching the attention of the guards, she can fix the hole and be back before they notice.

"In fact," Serena says in a louder voice, "this will probably take me most of the next high tide to complete."

Ervin finally catches on, his shoulders sagging. "Whose punishment is this, anyway?"

"Oh, it won't be so bad," Mariam says. She hands Serena a leather strip to bind a stack of books together. "You can brush up on the history of the King's Guard while you wait."

Serena smiles to herself as Ervin groans. She's been through those books, too—directly after Ervin was chosen for guard duty. Very dry reading, for any of the Undine.

Kai walks over to Ervin and pats his shoulder once. "Good luck with that."

"You're not staying?" Serena and Ervin ask together, both looking at Kai.

Kai looks at Serena, surprise lighting his face. "I was just tasked with making sure you got to the archives—Ervin can take it from here."

Ervin crosses his arms, leaning toward Serena as they watch Kai leave. "I told them you wouldn't cause any problems getting to the archives," Ervin says. "But it might take the entire King's Guard to get you to leave."

Serena smiles up at her friend, nudging him in the arm. "I'll take being the subject of conversation between guard members as a compliment."

"Don't flatter yourself," Ervin tilts his head toward her, his demeanor more relaxed now that the Second in Command isn't around.

"Oh trust me," says Serena. "I don't." She walks over to Mariam's table, chooses five books and lashes them together. Looking from Ervin to Mariam, Serena ties the binding around her waist.

"Some tea for Ervin?" Serena asks.

Mariam nods, trying to keep a smile off her face, and disappears to the back of the cavern. Ervin walks to the section on the King's Guard, dragging his fingertips across the book spines and pulling one out.

Serena turns her back to Ervin, scaling the wall to one of many reading coves carved into the cavern. The idea was to entice more of the Undine to the archives by making it feel like home, but the design did not have the desired effect.

Reaching her favorite spot high up on one wall, Serena shrinks back into the large space to disappear from prying eyes on the floor.

"How can I keep an eye on you if you are way up there?" Ervin shouts.

"Maybe I can help with that." Sasha's soft voice floats up to Serena. The sound of scales scratching against rock crawls closer and closer to Serena,

until Sasha pokes her head over the lip of the cove. "Mind if I join you?"

"I suppose not," Serena shuffles some of her books out of the way. The coves were not meant for more than one person.

Sasha crawls all the way in, lowering her voice to a whisper. "I thought I could turn pages and make some noise, you know, if you need to…exit, for a moment."

Serena risks a glance over the ledge. "You wouldn't tell?"

Shrugging, Sasha pulls her knees up to her chest and smiles. "Who would I tell?"

The smell of jasmine and chamomile drift upward—another treasure found above seas, and another secret kept between Serena and Mariam.

"Here we are," says Mariam, walking toward Ervin with a full mug of steeping tea. "It'll keep you awake and alert."

Serena catches the half-smile on Mariam's face. In fact, it will do the opposite, as sensitive as Undine are to herbs grown in The Dry.

"The tea should put him to asleep," Serena whispers to Sasha. "But it might be helpful if you were up here making noise should he wake before I return."

The maidens hear Ervin suck in his first sip. They look at each other, pressing their lips tight to keep from giggling.

"It’s pretty good. You want some up there?" Ervin asks, his loud voice echoing in the otherwise quiet archives.

Serena puts one finger over her lips, signaling Sasha not to answer.

"Oh, Serena will be too absorbed in her books by now," Mariam responds from her place at the catalogues. "Always is. And Sasha—I always thought her hard of hearing, that girl."

Serena lies down on her stomach, spreading the first book open. Sasha does the same on the other side of the book.

"We'll have to wait until the tea takes effect," whispers Serena. "Don't you have to go back to the caste?"

Wriggling into the hard rock, Sasha shrugs. "I'll just tell Zayla I got held up on a task for Mariam—which isn't a complete lie."

A small pang of jealousy runs through Serena's chest. The beloved maidens of the Sunbeam family never get in trouble.

Ignoring it because Sasha has never been anything but nice to Serena, the maidens bend their heads over the book, Serena tilting it so Sasha

doesn't have to read upside down. The first chapter tells of the history between werewolves and Undine.

"I can't believe we created them," says Sasha.

Serena turns the page. "We needed the protection."

Undine must go on land during the full moon in Ungainly form to conceive and then to give birth to their young. Mostly clumsy and unused to Ungainly bodies, the Undine needed protection from creatures that patrol the forest and from humans. Though male Undine are of course required to go on land the first time, to conceive, traditionally they do not accompany their mates during labor.

"Especially on the birthing nights."

"Like the Maiden's Massacre." Right as the words finish forming on her lips, Sasha covers her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she says through her fingers. "I didn't mean to bring that up."

Serena tries forcing a smile. "It's okay. It's not like I remember it."

During a birthing night, when Serena's own mother was in labor with her, the werewolves revolted. A chaotic blood bath under the full moon ensued. Serena runs her fingers over the scratchy pages in the history book.

"They say it was over quick," says Serena.

Up and down the beach, werewolves slaughtered maidens and their babies, fresh from the womb. The king himself emerged to the cries of his dying wife, along with a score of guards and Serena's own father, or so she was told. The Undine were wholly unprepared for the uprising. The king's wife passed to the afterlife in her husband's arms. Turning in rage at the werewolves, the king engaged in a fight that left him eternally debilitated. The only Undine to return alive was Serena, in the arms of the king, as he crawled back to the waves.

"They say that as the bodies of the dead were burning as an offering to the armory fires, including that of the queen and her newborn son, plus my own mother and father, I was swaddled and sleeping in my orphanage cradle." Serena doesn't bother to hide the bitter tone to her voice. "It's no wonder most maidens don't like me. It should have been the queen, or at least her son that returned—not me."

Playing with the frayed edges of the hard-backed book, Sasha leans her head against one hand. "Maybe the fact that it was you who returned in the

arms of the king is what sets you apart from other maidens. It's not that you are disliked—it's just from day one, you have been on another level."

"What do you mean?" asks Serena.

Sasha shrugs, a concentrated frown on her face. "Growing up, whenever I was talking about our caste with my mother and your name came up, she changes the subject abruptly. Based on the same reaction I get from our other caste mates when you are mentioned, their mothers did the same. Discussing you is as forbidden as discussing personal habits of the king—even though it has never been decreed."

Serena stares at Sasha, trying to process this new information. Looking intently at the words in the open book in front of them, Sasha avoids Serena's gaze.

"So why talk to me now?" asks Serena.

Sasha smiles, finally meeting her gaze. "Probably because I am not supposed to."

Sasha's smile is as bright at the sun, and it is almost impossible not to return the gesture.

"Come on," says Sasha. "Let's concentrate on more important things. Like The Choosing. I'm hoping for garden duty—what about you?"

"I don't know," Serena peeks over the ledge at Mariam. "I love being in the archives, and Mariam told the council she needs a new assistant. The match just makes sense, especially since no one else will be pining after the job."

"Yeah but the council isn't always known for making sense," says Sasha. "But what else could they possibly assign to you?"

Serena shrugs, turning the page of the book. A vivid drawing of a werewolf standing over a dead maiden in Ungainly form covers the entire page. The wolf is almost twice her size, shoulders bulking with muscle. Yellow saliva drips from the beast's fangs into an open gash in the maiden's neck. A pool of her own blood seeps onto the ground beside her, and the wolf's curved claws rest in the thick, crimson puddle.

"Well if that isn't a foretelling…" Sasha mumbles.

Serena's eyes snap to hers.

"Sorry," says Sasha.

Taking a deep breath in, Serena squeezes her eyes shut and closes the book.

A clatter below startles the maidens, and they peek over the ledge. Mariam has dropped her own mug but instead of cleaning up the mess, she is watching Ervin for signs of movement. He is already face down on his book, arms draped over the table, his breathing slow and deep. Mariam looks up at Serena and nods.

Laying her hand on Serena's shoulder, Sasha leans toward Serena. "I'll help cover, and I promise I won't tell."

Serena raises an eyebrow. Kind or not, how does she know she can trust this maiden?

"Let me do this one thing for you," Sasha whispers. "Consider it a… Choosing gift."

Relenting, Serena smiles. "Thank you, Sasha." She scales down the wall, padded boots hitting the ground with a light thud.

Mariam turns as Serena passes, mouthing the words, '*be careful'*.

'*Always am'*, Serena mouths back, with a light pat on the back of Mariam's shoulder.

Serena leaves the archives, diving back into the water to navigate the entrance tunnel. When she reaches the surface, bobbing on the west side of Vancouver Island, the sun is sinking into the ocean. Already, she can spot the outline of the moon behind her. It is waning, and though it may look the part of a full moon there will be no werewolves tonight…hopefully. Though her history lessons have taught that werewolves can only change on a full moon, the werewolf that chased her was no mirage.

Normally, the shadows cast by seagulls skimming the waves for their dinner hides Serena as she moves in closer to shore undetected. This evening, though, the skies are as deserted as the thin strip of beach. A light rain falls and thunder cracks in the distance.

Serena disappears below the water, resurfacing down the stream. The beach, for the most part, is off the Ungainly-beaten path. Only those with a sense of adventure, or those looking for a long walk and some privacy, come here. Her eyes scan the shoreline for signs of life—Ungainly or otherwise. Werewolves aren't the only animals to inhabit these forests—grizzly bears, coyotes, and cougars all patrol the borders where Serena's world ends. But there are no creatures on the beaches tonight.

She dips down once again and appears farther up the coast. The rain falls harder now, and lightning flashes as though the sky goddess herself is giving Serena the all clear.

One powerful push and Serena is caught up in the breakers. She swims just below the whitecaps, a mirror image of a surfer gliding on a wave. One of her fins slice up, catching the feel of briny air.

All too soon, the earth below angles up to meet the sky, and the ocean disappears in a squeeze between them. Serena's smile grows wider, as it always does when she flirts with the edge of the world.

Somersaulting with the dying wave, Serena’s fins brush against sand, air, sand, air. On the next flip, a cold wind scrapes against the bottom of her freshly formed feet, still raw from scales retracting in. Serena tucks her legs for one more roll then straightens them to stand. She sinks into wet sand as the remnants of a once powerful wave lick at her ankles—a desperate attempt to call her back into its clutches.

Serena moves forward, toward the moon. Another force, almost as powerful as the ocean, calls to the Undine maiden.

Chapter Five

The old-growth fir and cedar forest edges up against the ocean under a dark sky. Giant conifer and maple trees reach up from a mass of wet moss so thick the soil cannot be seen beneath it. The vivid green is reminiscent of the now extinct Palau Nephthea, or green tree coral. The delicate structure long since given into deteriorating conditions in its environment.

How long until the same happens to the forest?

Through the pools of collected rain on the ground, Serena crosses the barren beach to take cover in the trees. Pausing next to a fallen tree that still stands twice her height on its side, Serena squats, listening to make sure she is still alone and waits for the crickets to resume their symphony. One hesitant chirp sounds, beginning the chorus again. Serena runs her hand over the rough bark of the tree—dark brown amidst a backdrop of green. Compared to the diverse and complex Deep, the colors and textures here are simple. For Serena, the unadorned Dry is a much needed repose from the cacophony of Society.

Briefly, Serena considers this may be a bad idea. If she is caught, there is no doubt the king will allow a trial, and a second excursion wouldn't exactly help her case.

More chirps chime in as Serena lifts her chin to sniff the musky air, which is scented with an underlying tone of rotting vegetation. Her keen sense of smell confirms neither Ungainlies nor wet animals skulk nearby.

If I am caught and thrown in prison, thinks Serena. *I will never have the chance to help Mariam.* She can't imaging the clumsy bookkeeper wandering into The Dry herself.

Serena lifts herself up and climbs over the fallen tree. The next one is so big she has to crawl under. Picking up her pace, Serena jogs through the forest toward the hallow holes of the archives. In The Dry, her body is weighted, and the ground is wet and slippery. Running and jumping is hard work, but Serena revels in the challenge. Besides, regular visits are necessary for her sanity—shrub overgrowth or no.

When she reaches the clearing, her heart is pounding inside of her chest and the gills on her neck are in a frantic flap to suck oxygen from water

that isn't there, even though she breathes through her mouth on land. The occasional teasing raindrop slicking down from the curled tresses of her black hair entice the gills to keep trying.

Undine are taught that werewolves can smell their scales. Serena is bold in retracting more of her armor, hoping to remain undetected.

Glancing up, Serena pauses to look at the small, circular break in trees directly above the archives, letting the rain wash over her face. The limitless sky above is liberating. It seems to have no boundaries, unlike the constricting borders of the Undine kingdom.

Taking a deep breath, Serena directs her attention back to the ground. Stepping around several holes, she repeats the layout to herself as though she is in a naval minefield.

"Move to the right—that one opens just above my reading cove. Leap over the hole for the coral section," she whispers.

Finally, Serena approaches the chasm above the catalogues. She squats down, feeling the overgrown fern while she keeps her eyes up. Her fingers hit fresh, loose soil. She brings a handful to her face and inhales.

Recently planted…

Her eyes grow wide and her heart stills. She fights back the scales trying to force their way forward—armor that responds to a perceived threat. Her eyes dart around, searching the tree line for signs of movement, but sheets of rain distort her view.

The sky is no longer liberating. It bears down on her, creating more pressure than the ocean deep. The stars are bright pinpoints of light, threatening to sear straight into her bones. Serena hunches her shoulders, craving the safety of her sleeping cove. Out here she is too vulnerable, too exposed.

On her left, a small branch gives way to the weight of water collecting in pools on top and falls to the ground. She expands her senses, automatically sending out the echolocation signals. They work so well underwater, but here the sound doesn't travel as far, and it bounces back full of distortion. Serena can't help but think of Ervin, her temporary guard, asleep just below her. He is so close, yet worlds away.

A bush shakes on her right. She turns her head, squinting into the dark shrubbery and twisting branches. Her heart pounds furiously against her ribcage, like driftwood caught between a strong current and the rocky shore.

Eyes steadfast on the bushes, she feels the ground for the plant that has been blocking sunlight to the archives, grabbing it by its roots. She tugs it loose, losing her balance as it springs out of the ground. Regaining her center, Serena sprints for the tree line, away from the noise. Heading for a dense grove, she jumps into thick plant life.

Is that a growl? she asks herself, straining to hear the sound again—the noise is difficult to discern amidst the thundering rain.

I know these woods better than any Undine, Serena thinks. But as she runs through the trees, sharp branches lash out at her, slowing her down. Her foot lands in a patch of thick moss, sinking in. Stumbling out of it, she grows less confident. Pushing hard for the tree ahead, Serena grits her teeth and squeezes the plant in her hands. A few feet away, she leaps, catching onto the lower branch. Her legs swing forward and she uses the momentum to kip up, pushing her upper body above the branch. She steadies herself, pulling up one leg, then the other. As her last foot scrapes against rough bark she feels a whoosh of wind just below her toes, like something is attempting to grab at her feet.

A paw?!

She wavers on the branch, feet gripping it as her arms wave in wide circles, trying to maintain her balance. A vision of the blood-covered maiden, dead under glowing, red wolf eyes assaults her as Serena hunches under the chills that brush her shoulders. Pivoting on the balls of her feet, she steadies herself, backing up against the firm trunk. She throws her arms behind her, wrapping them around the tree, and peers over the branch below.

There is nothing.

Just soggy ground.

Her eyes flutter closed.

Serena breathes hard and leans her head back against the tree. It could all be her imagination, but she doesn't want to risk crawling down out of the tree. Neither does she want to risk waiting out the night and being caught at sunrise by an Ungainly hiking through the forest. Serena squats down on the large branch and crawls forward, studying the ground. It is blurry from so high up and the dark soil blends in with the even darker shadows of plants. Harsh rain gives way to a soft dribble.

Serena closes her eyes, picturing where she is and where she needs to go. The wolfsbane flower patch is straight ahead, the ocean to the rear.

Either one would mean safety if creatures are patrolling the forest tonight.

The plant she still holds is crushed, caught between her hand and the branch when she climbed up. She throws it up and away from where she stands. When it lands, there is a quick scuffle and the bushes rattle. Serena scans them for a pair of red eyes.

Silence.

Seconds pass, stretching into minutes. Serena’s heart resumes a steady beat, keeping time to the crash of waves in the distance. Above, a flock of birds take flight, causing bits of leaves to flutter down from the upper canopy. A smile tugs at the corner of Serena’s mouth.

Numerous branches twist and turn, providing steady footholds that guide Serena up the massive trunk, easing her higher into the sky. She seeks out a strong branch on the next tree over and leaps to it before she has a chance to talk herself out of it. The air is as fresh and crisp as when the currents surge and shift. She lands hard in the next tree, gripping the trunk so she doesn't fall.

Serena makes her way to the other side of the tree and leaps again, arching into the sky, the pull of the moon fighting against gravity to keep her airborne. The Earth wins, and Serena sails back down. This time, her feet slip and she doesn't get her arms out fast enough to catch herself. She falls to the branch below, and it cracks beneath her weight and Serena is in free fall.

Scales emerge on her back, up her neck, and even on her scalp, protecting her fragile bones from several hard hits against the tree. Finally, one branch holds and Serena has a chance to catch her footing. Realizing how close she is to the ground, Serena scrambles up the tree again, out of the reach of any potential predators lurking below. There’s no use in becoming immortalized as a dead maiden between the pages of a book.

Back on track, Serena thinks, hearing the sound of the ocean growing louder. *Just a few more.*

Her hands shake knowing the next leap will be the hardest—needing enough momentum to take it with her straight into the sea. She backs up to the trunk, bends her knees slightly, and runs with sure, steady steps.

Another leap. No longer concerned with the moon or the waves, Serena’s eyes lock on the landing branch. It bows under her weight, but she is already moving across it. Leap, arc, land. A flutter of feet. She can't distinguish sounds on the ground from the noise she is making in the air.

Leap and arc. This time the waves appear between the trunks of the trees. Land. One more tree to traverse. There is no arc with the next jump. She aims for a lower branch, preparing for her descent to the ground. Adrenaline pushes her across the final tree and in a flash her bare feet hit powdery sand.

Serena urges her tired body on. If there was anything in the forest tonight, she made more than enough noise to attract its attention. Scores of scales emerge along her legs, driven by sheer terror coursing through her veins. Between her thighs the scales grab onto each other forcing her legs to mold into a tail. Her stride constrained, Serena stumbles and falls forward into the shallow reach of the ocean, her body already completing the transformation, instinct overtaking necessity.

Her hands scramble, trying to pull her fins forward but only coming up with useless clumps of disintegrating sand. Out of choices, Serena opens her mouth and sings, pleading for help. The sea answers, building momentum for a strong swell. Her tail gives wild flops and her voice grows louder—more urgent. When the wave reaches her, she is all but blind with fear.

She curls into a fetal position as the water crashes over. When the ocean retreats, Serena goes with it, her fins leaving faint marks imprinted into the sand that disappear with the next wave.

Chapter Six

"Are you okay?" Mariam asks, intercepting Serena with a hug.

Closing her eyes, Serena tries concentrating on something peaceful, like pink waves at sundown. Her shaking body calms as it sheds the last of the salty ocean water, dripping from underneath her robe. "I'm fine, Mariam," Serena mumbles. "Now."

Mariam squeezes tighter and Serena's eyes wander up to the reading cove. Sasha peeks out over the edge and waves.

A chair moves, squeaking against the rough floor, sending Sasha back into the cove.

Mariam and Serena pull apart.

Standing from the table, Ervin stretches and lets out a loud yawn. He rubs sleep from his eyes, then freezes.

"I fell asleep," he announces, his voice tinged with shock.

"I'd say so," says Mariam, turning back toward her catalogues, busying herself with reorganizing the card files. "I kept an eye on Serena for you."

His eyes flit across the floor. Wet footprints leave an obvious track from the entrance.

Ervin opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by a messenger entering the archives.

"Word on my reassignment, I hope." Ervin crosses his arms.

"Er, no." The messenger clears his throat. "There was a distress call from The Dry."

"A call?" Ervin's arms drop to his sides. Behind him, Mariam glances at Serena. They wouldn't have heard Serena's song here in the archives.

"King Merrick has ordered Assembly in the Great Hall," says the messenger.

"Two days early? Must be important." Ervin turns to Serena.

"What?" she asks.

"Why do I feel like this has something to do with you?" he asks.

Mariam clears her throat. "May I remind you she was under your watch."

"Yes, but—"

"But what?" Serena cuts off Ervin, challenging him in front of the messenger.

Ervin scratches the back of his neck. "Nothing. Come on—can't keep the king waiting."

By the time Serena, Ervin, and Mariam arrive in the main cave system, most of Society is already there, and the corridor is quickly emptying into the Great Hall. Ervin and Mariam, with Serena close behind, round a corner, almost running into another group. Kai and one other guard escort a maiden, each with a tight grasp around her upper arms.

"What happened?" Ervin asks Kai.

"She couldn't resist the call," Kai tells Ervin.

Serena glances at the maiden, who keeps her eyes downcast. "It was that alluring?" she asks.

The other guard shrugs. "She didn't even come back at the King's decree. I've never seen anyone resist his orders before. If it wasn't for Kai holding her back, she'd of been in The Dry within seconds. Werewolf fodder for sure."

Kai stares at Serena, unflinching and stone-faced. His sea-green eyes are bright, his brow furrowed.

Serena shifts on her feet. *Does he know it was my call? How could he?*

Serena looks at the maiden again, almost wanting to thank Kai for stopping her. But which is worse? Risking The Dry to answer a call, or defying the king? The penalties of Society are harsh for ignoring orders, and the punishments are always carried through without mercy. There are too few Undine left to allow anyone to jeopardize Society. Serena swallows hard as she remembers the charges that she may face, just a few moments from now.

Kai turns to Ervin. "You didn't hear the call?"

"No," Ervin snaps his heels together as he addresses his superior. His scales duplicate the pattern Kai wears down his legs, almost automatically. "We were all in the archives, where you left us…" Ervin trails off, glancing at Serena.

"As you say," Kai responds, following Ervin's gaze back to Serena.

"We mustn't keep the king waiting," Mariam says, pulling Serena toward the Great Hall. "We thank you for your service," she dismisses Kai in a formal tone.

Not one word, Mariam mouths to Serena, as they follow Ervin through the archway into the large cavern. Serena nods, stealing one last glance at the maiden being escorted to her punishment.

The trio takes a place toward the rear, backing up against the rough rock. Miriam’s presence is calming, almost as much as the fact that several-hundred heads face away from Serena. Few, if any, eyes are on her.

The largest room of the kingdom is packed with the Undine. The expansive ceiling is bare, with most of the larger stalactites long since removed. Underneath it, a mob of Undine stand shoulder to shoulder. They smell as bitter as a kelp forest, the stench so thick in the air Serena could almost taste it. She watches Mariam run her tongue through her mouth in distaste.

Serena smiles to herself. Mariam loathes crowds, too.

Sasha slips through the entrance after them, her bright orange scales making it impossible for her to blend. Without looking at Serena, she joins her mother and sister in the middle of the hall. Especially when they stand together, the color of the Sunbeam family shines out like a beacon. Colors are rarely handed down from one generation to the next, though in this case orange must be a dominant shade. Serena isn't sure what coloring their father had—he was killed even before Sasha and Serena entered their first caste, in one of many battles over the years as Undine endeavor to take back their beaches.

Deep reds, pinks, silvers, golds, and occasional greens crowd the hall like corals packed onto a cliff, clamoring to reach the best nutrients. Serena's dark blue and Mariam's brown scales help them blend in to the shadows of the cliff that hangs over them. Only Ervin's scales stand out, if anything because of their modesty. They are light and dull brown, as is the same with most males, lacking the vibrant colors of Undine maidens.

In the Great Hall, bioluminescent hair of most still glows like stimulated jellyfish. The radiance smolders out as the minutes pass after they've surfaced. An almost coordinated wave of dying embers, rolling through the crowd all the way to the back. Mariam and Serena have better control over their hair than most with years of practice out of water in the hall of archives, but Ervin's hair still glows, highlighting all three of their faces.

Mariam leans forward on her toes, straining to hear the session, which has already begun. Serena doesn't have to do the same to spot Zayla, her

golden scales standing out among the line of council members, waiting for her chance to call Serena to trial.

"How do we know the prints aren't from last night, when the wolf was spotted by the Temporal Caste?" Nerin stands next to King Merrick sitting on his throne, questioning a young Undine in front of them. "We know for sure tonight was not a full moon."

Her small voice doesn't reach the back of the cavern where Serena stands. Whatever she says causes the king to grimace. The council members standing off to the side whisper amongst themselves.

"Speak up, so the whole of Society can hear you," Nerin commands.

The Undine turns and Serena recognizes her as a gardening apprentice, Lilly, two castes ahead of Serena. "Part of our duty when we go to the gardens after each full moon is to record the positions of wolf prints so we can track their pack numbers and locations, then erase them before they can attract any Ungainly attention. I am sure that section of the forest was cleared of tracks."

"We'll investigate the matter and consider your request for extra guards." Nerin says, folding her hands in front of her. "Is that all?"

Lilly shakes her head then halfway turns, so all of Society may hear, remembering the last rebuke. "There was another set of footprints…" she pauses, and swallows hard. Serena can see it from all the way in the back. "Undine footprints."

A ripple of murmurs runs through the crowd. They grow to panicky whispers, murmurings of an Undine traitor and conspirator. Those who haven't mastered control of their scale pigmentation begin to involuntarily flicker new colors. Yellows and blues light up the Great Hall, as though the whole of Society seeks attention.

Serena and the friends by her side are in the shadow of a protruding cliff. Their reflective guanine crystals spaced throughout Undine skin, acting as mirrors to replicate the immediate environment, don't react, leaving them lost in one large chaotic mess of color.

Serena scans the commotion, then stops. Her eyes lock with those of the king himself. He is leaning forward in his chair, hands gripping the etched armrests, and there is no doubt he is looking at her. Almost as if she sticks out simply because she doesn't mimic the rest of Society.

Nerin breaks the impasse by stepping in front of King Merrick, arms raised to calm the crowd. When the chatter dies down, she speaks. "Are

you positive? Perhaps it could have been an Ungainly."

Lilly licks her lower lip. "What little webbing remains between the toes in Ungainly form was apparent in the print."

"And do you think the print has anything to do with the call for help we heard not hours ago?"

Hidden under their cliff, Serena's eyes go wide and Ervin stands as rigid as the trident by his side. Serena tries to reign in the rush of panic flooding her veins. *No one would recognize my call—I've never done it before. And I have an alibi.* She glances at Ervin.

"I'm not sure," says Lilly, twisting her fingers together. "But I did make a caste of the print." She turns to the crowd behind her. Another maiden squeezes out, delivering a large rock into Lilly's hands. Lilly looks at the king for further instruction.

"Put it down," says the king.

When she does, there is a show of Undine popping up on their toes, peeking out from behind shoulders of those in front of them, each maiden straining to catch a glimpse.

Nerin raises her hands, and the commotion dies down. "It is a footprint, fossilized with a hardened mixture of limestone and sand," Nerin says for the benefit of those who cannot see. "The Undine webbing in between the toes is apparent."

"And how do we know these two footprints, one werewolf and one Undine, were laid side by side at the same time and not hours apart?" asks the king.

"The clovers beneath them both were just beginning to spring back up when I found them, your majesty." Lilly bows in an unnecessary curtsey.

The king clears his throat, and gestures to the footprint. "And what do you expect us to do, have every maiden measure their foot against the rock? That would take all night!"

"Apologies, your majesty. I am not expecting anything of the court."

Though it was said through meek lips and a lowered head, the king glowers at the comment.

"The court will certainly not stand idle, if that is what you are insinuating," the king's voice bellows out at the shivering maiden.

She shakes her head, but has all but lost her voice.

"Perhaps, your majesty—I might offer a speedy solution," Zayla says, stepping out from the line of council members.

The king takes a deep breath. "As you say," he mumbles to Zayla.

Lifting her chin, Zayla steps forward again. "I call Serena Moon-Shadow. Having witnessed her return from The Dry during an unauthorized visit, I believe this footprint serves as proof of the crime of absconding."

Serena's lips tremble, and her cheeks burn.

My own teacher hates me.

"Fine," King Merrick says, his rough voice rumbling through the cave. It is a stark contrast to Zayla's smooth tone and exact articulation. "Step forward, Serena Moon-Shadow."

A murmur sweeps through Society. Heads turn, each attempting to seek out the accused. A jagged line parts down the middle of the crowd, all the way back to Serena. When she looks up, the king's stare fixes her in place, the shadows of the cliff no longer offering her protection.

He raises his hand, beckoning. Like an obedient subject, Serena steps forward. With each slow stride ahead, more murmurs die out. As she passes each Undine, scales emerge along their feet or down their arms as if they are warding off whatever ill-gotten fate Serena exudes.

The sprawling cavern closes in, pressing down on Serena's shoulders and chest, constricting her breathing. She tries imagining she is in her sleeping cove. Eyes glistening around her become the minerals of the cave walls, and solitude sets in.

Lilly and Zayla move aside as Serena steps up to the smooth, mid-platform. It raises halfway up to the king's throne, slightly higher than the rest of the ground Society stands upon.

Serena meets the eyes of the king. He seems larger than she remembers, his shoulders almost spanning the width of the throne behind him.

"If you please," Nerin nods to the rock in front of Serena.

Swallowing hard, Serena lifts her foot to the mold. The king leans forward to watch.

The ridges of the webbing between Serena’s toes fall into their individual places in the mold—it is a perfect fit.

The king glances only briefly, then settles back into his throne, a smug smile on his face. "Let it be noted—"

"I object," Nerin's voice rings through the cavern.

"Oh?" says the king.

"The print is a close match, to be sure. But we cannot condemn the girl on this piece of evidence alone when there could be several other close matches among us." Nerin shoos her hand at Serena, motioning her to move away from the footprint.

Taking one step back, Serena holds her breath, holding hope that the King's Second will come to her rescue.

"And since, as the king says, it will take far too long to test every Undine, I insist we explore the only other piece of evidence offered." Her eyes fall on Serena. "Tonight's call."

The king breaks his composure and sighs. He rubs at his temples.

Nerin nods, as if that is all the permission she needs. "Serena, if you will."

The weight of a thousand eyes burn into Serena.

"Sing," Nerin commands.

Chapter Seven

Serena's stomach knots. Behind her, the audience is restless.

Why should they be anxious? It's me who has to sing.

"Will the accused please sing?" King Merrick repeats Nerin's command.

Serena licks her lips. "Why?"

A gasp and a disapproving murmur runs through the crowd. It isn't customary to question an order of the king.

He frowns, and Nerin glares at Serena.

"I apologize, your majesty. I just don't understand the importance of the call last night."

"I see." King Merrick rubs his chin. He stays silent for the count of several breakers, studying his people. When he speaks, his voice is soft. The fidgeting, hushed whispers, and other extraneous noises of a crowd subside, as everyone strains to hear.

"I think no one can deny the allure of the call that night," says the king. "Enticing as it was, several Undine gravitated toward The Dry. They would've gone right to land had I not issued a decree for an emergency Assembly. Even after my order, some had trouble turning their backs to the call."

Council members nod in agreement.

King Merrick continues. "According to our Head Scientist, the surge of the surf was reportedly altered. It seems it was an extraordinary call, indeed."

Everyone leans in to hear what the king has to say.

"You can see, Serena, the power one voice can have," he gestures to the crowd. His next words are spoken much louder. "Have you had occasion to sing, Serena Moon-Shadow? Recently?"

Serena clasps her hands in front of her to keep from rubbing them along her scales. "Not really."

"What about in your caste?" asks the king.

"My caste?" Serena furrows her eyebrows.

"Oh, I don't know." The king runs a hand down his beard. "For example…your first year graduation song. Your voice was surely heard then, at least by your caste mates standing next to you."

"No, I don't think so." Serena blushes, knowing the eyes of her former Caste Master are on her. "I always stood at the back and usually just lip synched."

"Usually?" King Merrick prods.

She shifts from one foot to another. "Always, actually." Her guilt over the confession feels silly and she is sure Zayla's mouth is turned down in a disapproving frown. "I don't like the attention."

"Well," says the king. "Perhaps tonight we can take you out of the spotlight for good. But first you must walk through it." The king leans forward. "Sing."

The simple command rings throughout the Great Hall. The word keeps echoing back to Serena, each time pinning her to the spot. There is no escape from the request. Turning around to face Society, they are whispering amongst each other.

Serena sighs, resigning. She closes her eyes and opens her mouth.

The first sound to breeze past her lips is a low hum. She keeps it steady, pushing it out until she hears its echoes return. The craggy walls of the cavern come into focus behind her closed eyes. She cocks her ear. Just as with sending her echolocation signal out in the ocean, the rebound is painting a detailed picture of her surroundings. It isn't hazy and distorted like it is in The Dry, but this is a different type of signal.

Serena raises her pitch and turns her head as the next hum emerges. She puts extra breath into the notes that have to extend to reach the farthest crevices of the cavern.

What comes back is more than just sharpened features of the walls. Harmony curves around baby stalactites, so small that Undine eyes cannot yet see them. It brings back with it the scent of hardened earth, dripping with condensation. Serena feels the melody returning. She pushes it back out, adding a new layer of composition for more depth.

When she opens her eyes, Society has gone quiet and still. Many have their fingertips to their lips.

Serena lets the hum die, her eyes still scan Society. Their gazes are still glassy, as if they are expecting more.

Opening the constricting gills alongside her neck, Serena allows uninhibited air to flow. Her volume increases as she sings again, this time with a quicker beat. She adds words to the song. They are in the ancient language; Serena only understands the meaning of half of them. She knows the song from the elderly Undine, humming the tune as they string together necklaces with oyster pearls. Serena found the words in a book and spent one afternoon memorizing them.

Her song resonates throughout the Great Hall. Everything looks more beautiful with the tune. The walls shimmer with jewels and stones, accentuated by glowing Undine bioluminescent hair. Society is drawn forward by the song. Some gravitating forward, while others simply lean into the pure, sonorous ring of Serena's voice.

Serena stops singing as another sound begins to accompany her song. It is rushing water, entering the Great Hall. Within a few moments the ocean is past their ankles.

She lets the last notes die off, muted by the waves.

Silence is broken by Evandre's voice. "The tide is too early."

Serena looks at the Head Scientist, standing in the line of council members. There is no malice behind her words. It is just simple fact, and with it, Serena has been discovered. Everyone knows. The call came from Serena.

She looks behind her and sees Nerin pressing her palm to her cheek.

Beside her, the king's hands lay limp in his lap, his body gone slack. He looks up at Serena, voice cracking as he speaks. "Your mother was a great singer, too."

Nerin clears her throat.

Remembering himself, the king straightens in his chair. "Serena Moon-Shadow, you stand accused before Society, king, and council for the crime of absconding." The king's words thunder through Serena, and she has to resist taking a step back. "There are witnesses including several of your own caste mates and your Caste Master witnessing your return from The Dry. There is hard evidence of your own footprint next to the that of a werewolf, and now we have proof that your song is powerful enough to beckon Undine and tide alike. This lends to the implication that there were not one but two recent unauthorized trips to the dry."

The king's words ring through Serena's head. Gray creeps into the edges of her vision and for a moment, Serena can pretend she is in a dream.

"You have provoked the werewolves and you have put our entire civilization at risk of discovery by Ungainlies. Nerin—do you have anything to add?" asks the King, without looking at his second.

Nerin's lips purse, then she pulls them back in. "I do not."

"We will now issue a verdict without further deliberations," says the king. "Do you prefer to proceed by judge or jury?"

The question directed at her brings the scene back into sharp focus. "Jury," Serena says without hesitation.

A ripple of murmurs runs through the crowd behind her and the king’s eyes grow wide. Her answer is unexpected. The council members always make up the jury, and they are never divided in their decisions. If one believes her to be guilty, and Zayla almost certainly does, they all will.

The king picks up his oversized trident, leaning against his throne, and bangs the blunt end on the ground. The crack bellows like a shockwave throughout the room and Serena takes a step back. Society goes silent.

He would condemn her anyway.

"Very well," grumbles the king. "As I appoint the jury, they will step forward with their decision. The sentencing shall be carried out directly thereafter."

Serena looks up at the king with narrowed eyes. She nods, just because there is no other way to respond.

"Zayla Star," says the king.

Serena's Caste Master, as a member of the council, is already on the mid-platform. She steps forward, curtsying to the king. Serena risks one glance at her, suddenly remembering she forgot her own curtsy. "Guilty, your majesty," she says without looking at Serena, then returns to her place in line.

The word stabs through Serena like a knife, straight into her gut. Her mouth drops open and her eyes sting.

"Murphy Air-Spirit."

The Head of the Guard and the next council member steps forward. His bow is formal, full of all the pomp and circumstance expected of the King's Guard. "Guilty, your majesty."

"Kai Forest."

The crowd parts once again, all the way to the back of the room at Kai, who has returned from delivering the first prisoner. He walks to the front, eyes on Serena the whole way. Once he is on the mid-platform, he bows. "I

respectfully abstain, your majesty. I was not present as the evidence was reviewed."

"Very well, Kai Forest."

Kai glances back at Serena before taking place in the line of jurors.

"Evandre Sea-Bird," the king announces the next juror.

The Head Scientist steps forward and curtsies to the king, her scales flashing a brilliant purple. "Guilty, your majesty."

Two more join the ranks—the Head Gardener, Sarafina, and the Healer, Hailey.

Guilty.

Guilty.

Serena surveys her line of arbitrators, her knees going weak. She longs for the uplifting support of the ocean.

"Isadora Night-Shade."

Isadora hesitates, and the wait is torment.

"Just say it," Serena murmurs in a bold statement to the Undine psychic. Serena bows her head in resignation of what the verdict will be.

"Guilty," says Isadora, so soft Serena thinks she must be the only one that can hear it.

The king turns to Serena. She has been found guilty—all there is left to do is sentence her. Straightening her spine and holding her shoulders back, Serena meets the kings eyes.

His hand tightens on his trident. "I will now select an appointee to pronounce your sentencing."

In the courts of the Undine, it is usually the guilty party that selects the one who decides the punishment. It is somehow more effective this way. Friends tend to give harsher punishments lest they be seen as too lenient and suffer a mass shunning from Society. It is truly a communal justice system.

Serena speaks up, forcing her dry throat to work. "I understand that the defendant is allowed to select her own—"

The clack of his trident against rock cuts her off. His eyes are already scanning Society for his pick. Serena's midnight blue scales flare, and this time she doesn't fight back the glow growing in her hair.

She steps forward. "I will make the selection—"

"I choose—" King Merrick tries talking over her.

Tears of anger spring to Serena’s eyes. "It is my verdict, my sentencing, and I elect—"

"Nerin Thunder-Cloud," they both say in unison.

King Merrick and Serena stare at each other. His mouth twitches under his white beard, but she can't be sure why. "Very well," he manages to grumble.

All Serena can think of now is the penalty for the worst cases of absconding—death. Her heart races, and she can feel a trickle of cold seawater drip down from her hair, running in between her shoulder blades and down her spine.

But the death sentence is the very reason she chose Nerin. *Nerin the Just,* Serena has overheard many a maiden assigning the King's Second a nickname. They giggle afterward, but the title is more than true. Nerin has always been even-handed and fair.

In her heart, Serena believes her ventures into The Dry were for a good cause. She hopes Nerin does, too.

The king turns to his second, and doesn't utter a word. Stepping forward, Nerin considers Serena. She glances at the fossilized footprint and over at Zayla. Finally, she looks at the king. Whatever Nerin sees there is beyond Serena, but it seems to have made her decision.

The King's Second turns to Society, raising her voice so everyone can hear. "I decline the death penalty."

It is all Serena can do to keep from running up the five steps to the high-platform, picking Nerin up, and squeezing her until she gasps for breath. Serena peeks at Society over her shoulder. Mariam has left the cozy cove and made her way up front. She gives Serena an enthusiastic wave.

"However…" begins Nerin. Mariam's hand freezes in the air, and Serena turns back around.

"Our laws dictate that if a death penalty is declined, three separate punishments must take its place. These punishments are to be assigned and carried out within a year from now, and they will be determined by those most affected by your crime."

Serena swallows hard. *I can handle this, anything is better than the death penalty.*

"I leave one punishment to the discretion of Zayla Star," says Nerin. "For the danger you put her and your caste mates in."

Maybe not.

"You were under her charge, Serena, and disobeyed her direct orders." Nerin turns to Zayla. "May your retribution be meaningful yet stern."

It'll be stern all right. She'll either throw me in prison or exile me altogether!

Zayla nods her head, accepting the responsibility.

"As for putting the whole of Society at risk of discovery, I elect King Merrick. As our king and leader, he represents all that Serena has endangered."

King Merrick merely grunts.

"May your retribution be…objective, your majesty."

To Serena, it feels like his punishment would be exactly the opposite, so she is at least glad Nerin said it.

"And finally, I elect Isadora as one who may be able to determine the best path for Serena." The Undine psychic steps forward and nods. She is the king's sister-in-law, twin to the Queen who passed to the afterlife during the Maiden's Massacre. Her black scales glitter, giving the impression they are in constant motion, moving independently of one another.

"May your retribution be well-intentioned," says Nerin.

"As you say," Isadora nods.

Serena licks her lips. *Nothing is over yet.* They can announce their punishments at any time within the year, and the wait will be torment.

Before she can object, and before she can fully process everything that just occurred, the king speaks again. "Assembly is adjourned."

Serena feels a hand on her arm and jumps. When she looks over her shoulder, both Mariam and Ervin are standing behind her.

"Come on," Mariam whispers. "We'll accompany you home."

Serena allows them to lead her away, surprised by how quickly the rest of Society leaves the Great Hall ahead of her.

Probably before King Merrick has time to sentence anyone else, Serena thinks to herself. Though she always was proud of the fact that Society could accuse, deliberate, and sentence mostly within the span of one session, Serena is no longer impressed, and can readily point out several flaws to the system.

She allows the full length of her feet, webbing and all, to drag over the rocky ground. The passageways are empty and cold. Before the first turn,

Ervin spins around on his heels, causing Serena and Mariam to stop short.

"You do realize, you aren't the only one getting in trouble for this. I was supposed to be guarding you and it was just proved in front of everyone that I shirked my duties," Ervin grumbles.

"May I remind you, guard," Mariam clips her words. "That Serena was under your charge. You are the one that fell asleep."

Ervin presses his lips together.

Mariam takes a step toward him and lowers her voice. Her scales flare a deeper brown. "Serena may not have been in the right, but neither were you."

A flash of guilt runs through Serena. Ervin did her a favor, he shouldn't be punished for it.

"I won't tell anyone, Ervin," Serena says, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Mariam narrows her eyes at Serena, her lips as tight as Ervin's.

I know she is just trying to help, but it can't be at the expense of Ervin.

Ervin shakes off Serena's hand and picks up his trident. "Come on, tide is almost in." He turns and walks away from the pair of maidens.

Serena sighs. *Somehow I've managed to offend my only two allies just as I'm about to face my punishments.*

Chapter Eight

"Serena, wake up. Wake up!"

A rough shake at her shoulder draws Serena from her dreams. As she opens her eyes Ervin comes into focus.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Serena asks, rolling over and curling her arms into her chest.

He snorts. "Not nearly as much as you. But I guarantee no one else in your caste is sleeping right now."

"Hmm? Why?" Serena asks, pushing herself up as far as her small sleeping cove allows.

"The Choosing is today! Come on, you're going to be late."

Her eyes fly open, fully alert now. With all the absconding nonsense, she had completely forgotten about the ceremony. Once an Undine maiden reaches the age of eighteen, they are assigned a job within Society. The entire caste enters The Choosing together. Although Serena is the only one who hasn't turned eighteen, they lump her in with the caste. She wouldn't rate an entire Choosing ceremony by herself.

Serena jumps down splashing water over the recently dried walls. Ervin takes a step back.

"Are you still mad at me?" Serena asks.

Ervin shrugs. "Murphy assigned me extra rounds. I could use the extra swimming, anyway—
so we'll call it even." He glances at Serena, frowning. "You're not wearing that, are you?"

Serena looked down at her scales. They still cover her entire body, just below her neckline.

She mimics Ervin's frown. *What more is there to do?*

Serena recalls the last few Choosing ceremonies. Finally, she decides on an alteration to her scales. Dots of shiny pearl pop up, like diamonds scattered across a midnight blue sea. She lengthens the sleeves on her arms until they come to a sharp point at her middle knuckle.

Serena looks back up at Ervin with a tentative smile.

"No," he rolls his eyes. "I mean—like decorative pieces. Girls usually go all out for The Choosing."

Serena cocks her head. Hasn't he realized by now that she is unlike most girls?

Her eyes drift to her dry box. Ervin nods, encouraging her. Serena sighs and moves to the box. She opens it, rooting through her tools setting aside hammers, chisels, and screwdrivers. Next are CO_2 canisters and notebooks with two years' worth of recorded experiments. Ervin lets out an exasperated sigh when she pulls out a microscope.

“This is completely necessary for observing minuscule fissures in shells,” she says. "Here," she finally announces, pulling out a small case. Two rows of white clam shells are cemented to the top. Ervin leans over her shoulder as she balances the case across her knees and releases the clasp. The contents lie flat, sliding from one side to the other.

Serena picks up the only clue to her past, her mother's bracelet and necklace, part of her personal belongings as long as she can remember. The jewelry box is far too empty for a maiden her age. Serena slips on the freshwater crystal bracelet and removes the necklace, placing the other items back in the dry box.

A large, circular jewel encased in stone hangs from a simple chain. Dark gray and black swirls make the piece appear as though it is churning in on itself—the coloring similar to Serena’s scales.

"Here, let me." Ervin takes the necklace from her.

Serena stands and twists her long, black locks of hair up and out of the way so he can fasten the hook. When he steps back she lets the large jewel fall to her chest. Serena retracts a few more scales so the charm rests on smooth skin. The jewel draws attention to the cleft between her breasts. Heat crawls up her cheeks and she considers concealing herself higher again. Perhaps for the first time ever, she is self-conscience in front of Ervin.

Fidgeting with the necklace, Serena's eyes dart from his, down to the cave floor, and back again. She can feel the algae in the crab trap brush her ankles.

Say something, she thinks.

"Don't worry," he says.

She furrows her eyebrows in confusion.

He puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes. "I mean about being in The Dry for the Choosing Ceremony. King Merrick has ordered his whole guard on the beach for protection. I'll be watching your back."

"My back?" Serena looks down at her front. It is the most effort she has ever put into her appearance.

"Yeah." Ervin smiles. "Your back." He pats her shoulder twice, hard, then turns on his heels. Behind him, Serena follows, a few more scales crawling up her chest.

* * *

Choosing ceremonies have always taken place in The Dry. Proof of one werewolf out on other than a full moon was not enough caution to postpone or change the custom. Especially this time. This Choosing is special. It is The Choosing of the Temporal Caste—the final class. Perhaps the very last Choosing of the Undine species.

Serena follows Ervin to The Choosing grounds. She doesn't swim on his left this time, allowing his awkward gait to slow him. She needs time get her nerves under control and to stop her hands from jittering.

Months ago, after a year of shadowing each of the twelve jobs Society offers, Serena and her caste mates submitted their top three choices of work. Serena's first choice was Records Keeper Assistant. She would have written it down three times if she could. Her other two choices were Orphanage Attendant and Scientist Assistant. But she was sure she would be granted her first choice, especially since Mariam has petitioned for a permanent shadow. It is a job no one else pines after.

Serena and Ervin merge with the current, letting it pull them downstream. Ever since the Maiden's Massacre, the Choosing grounds change each year for safety reasons. This year Society gathers in the traditional spot, which happens to be the same location as the Maiden's Massacre, Cliff Beach.

Ervin turns for the beach on the west side of the island, struggling for a moment to leave the current. When he does, he glances behind him as if to see if Serena caught his falter. She looks away.

When Ervin turns back around, Serena sighs, then catches up to swim on his left. Serena spots fins ahead, bobbing near the surface. There are just as many Undine here as there were at Assembly, though the population looks twice the size spread out. No one wants to miss this ceremony.

Ervin swims forward, along the edge of the crowd toward the front. When the smooth water breaks into frothy, white waves, he transforms.

Scales cover his body in light-brown armor as he walks from the water with his trident to join the King's Guard.

They form a semi-circle on the beach around the Temporal Caste, facing the giant sandstone cliffs that separate one world from the next. Above them, the forest grows right to the edge of the cliff, a few trees leaning over as if they are about to be pushed off by their brethren clamoring for a spot in the sun.

Only one narrow passageway through the cliffs allows entry to the beach, and it is guarded by Murphy and Kai themselves. Kai turns slightly, catching Serena's eye. He makes a pointed glance at the moon, then gestures to his shadow stretched across the sand.

You're late, he tells her with one eyebrow raised, silently chiding her.

Serena gives an innocent shrug, then nods at Ervin. *His fault.*

Kai laughs loud enough to cause Murphy to break rank and fix his Second in Command with a hard stare. Kai salutes Murphy then turns back to the cliffs with a quick wink at Serena.

When she turns to face the ocean, she realizes the rest of her caste is standing in a line parallel to the water, scowling at her. Serena's eyes snap to the Caste Master standing in front of them. Zayla motions with her arm, an impatient gesture for Serena to join them.

Serena takes her place at the end of the line, breathing a sigh of relief that one of her three punishments did not come before the ceremony. They could very well deny her a title, robbing her of a chance to live out the rest of her days in the archives.

Waves come and go, seeming like a lifetime before members of the crowd peel their eyes away from Serena. It's not the same as enduring the accusations of absconding at Assembly. At least there she had her back turned to the audience.

Focusing on the whale-sized boulder that juts up out of the water in the midst of the Undine congregation, everyone awaits their king. Serena herself has had enough of him. She glances at Cordelia standing beside her, who wears her revealing burgundy garb even here, at the most important ceremony of her life. Serena scans Cordelia's scales, glittering in the moonlight. She has bracelets up to each elbow, and a small tiara sits on top of a mass of blond braids. Serena brushes her hair behind one ear, wishing she'd taken the time to a least pull the strands back.

Splashing at the whale-rock draws attention and the Undine behind it move aside, making room for a large wave that is gathering momentum. The crest builds then breaks against the rock. The closest Undine resurface as the thunderous swell subsides and all eyes fall upon King Merrick. He towers above Society, one throne replaced by another.

Under the light of the waning moon, the many colors of the king's tail stand out more prominently than in the dim shadows of the caves. As the only living male Undine that has color to his scales, it is said he carries the blood of the very first Undine, and that all the colors of Undine maidens are represented in his own scales.

The king settles and Nerin pushes herself up on one of the bottom ridges of the rock. "All hail our King," she calls out.

Society answers, their voices echoing across the water. "Long live the King."

The king thrusts his trident into the sky. Moonlight glints off the sharpened tips, and dances across the surface of the water creating a shimmering ring of light around the whale rock. When he brings the trident down, the ring of light races in toward the king, culminating in a shower of sparks as the trident's stem hammers against the rock. The ceremony begins.

Chapter Nine

"May I present to Society your Temporal Caste, who stand before you, ready for your Choosing," Zayla's says, her voice echoing past the breakers.

Though the caste members themselves select their top three jobs, the final decision rests with the king and council. Serena isn't aware of any Undine who did not get one of their three choices. Very few are even forced to take their third choice.

Zayla straightens from a deep curtsy, her golden scales glittering under the moonlight. The rest of Society, including the king, bow their heads in return. Zayla turns to face the caste.

"As your Caste Master, I proclaim each of you ready and fit to serve Society. As such, you are part of an endless circle of kinship."

A skitter among the mass of Undine in the ocean causes Zayla to pause. The Undine are most certainly not 'endless' and the Temporal Caste is proof itself. The ceremonial speech, uttered year after year for the graduating caste, is now invalidated by the shrinking numbers of the Undine race.

Zayla casts a glance over her shoulder at the onlookers. Her eyelashes flutter as she is thrown out of her ceremonial reverie. Her arms drop by her sides and she turns and surveys her pupils, as if seeing them in a new light. The uncomfortable silence is drawn out and Serena glimpses at the king. He doesn't intervene, just watches. Zayla takes in a shaky breath and wipes her cheek.

Serena squints, looking closer. *Is she crying?*

Another wave comes in, made weak by the rocks and sands of the earth. A myriad of bubbles reach out, skimming over the sand. The ocean's reach is interrupted by the feet of the Temporal Caste who stand on the beach, hardened scales sliding over ankles.

"How out of place we seem," Zayla says quietly. "Standing here with a mix of scales and skin, as though we are part of neither world."

The mouths of the Temporal Caste drop open. This is definitely not part of the speech. Serena is sure the Undine behind Zayla cannot hear. But the caste mates certainly can, as well as the King's Guard.

Out of the corner of her eye, Serena watches muscles tense up and down along the line of guards. It is the only break in character they exhibit, but it is enough.

Cordelia herself looks to be on the verge of tears, though for an entirely different reason. Her arms tremble in anger, the stacks of bracelets clinking together.

"She can't," Cordelia whispers to herself, crossing her arms.

Serena looks at Cordelia, meeting her eye.

"She can't do this now, of all times, to blubber about losing her job." Cordelia looks at Serena. "This isn't about her."

"No," says Serena, taking a step closer to Cordelia. The break in spacing draws attention from the crowd. Serena grasps Cordelia's wrist so the shaking stops. "But it's not about only us, either."

Serena looks out over the Undine treading water in the ocean, then up to the moon. The cliffs behind them seem to grow larger, looming over the diminishing Undine population.

Down the line of the Temporal Caste there are hesitant footsteps as the thirteen members break the ceremonial line and move closer together. The orange maiden on the other side of Cordelia, Sasha Sunbeam, grasps Cordelia’s left wrist to stop the rattling bracelets. Cordelia looks at Sasha, eyes narrowed, unsure if she should be offended or grateful. The next maiden over puts one hand on Sasha's shoulder, and another around her other neighbor's waist. One by one, the line moves closer, connecting physically in one way or another.

A new wave crashes ashore, stronger now. It reaches out, encircling the young Undine group. Where the scales of the ocean meet the skin of the land, sand and water support and empower them all at once. A flock of birds take flight from the cliffs, their silhouettes moving across the light of the moon.

Serena looks at her small group of caste mates and is greeted with hesitant, but hopeful smiles.

Zayla clears her throat, approaching the caste's smaller circle. She addresses the group as a whole. "And so you are one, the Temporal Caste. And I couldn't be more proud."

A squeeze of hands run down the line of Undine maidens.

"Are you willing and able to uphold the values and principles of Society?" Zayla asks the group.

The question is supposed to be asked of each graduating caste member individually, but they answer as one. "We are willing."

"Are you prepared to enter Society, no longer a student, but as a productive, contributing member?

"We are prepared."

"Of the ocean and of the moon…" Zayla begins the closing line.

"We are Undine," the Temporal Caste finishes for her.

Zayla smiles. "Now leave this beach and seek your king for assignment of your new roles in Society."

Someone from the crowd hollers, then another. A great whooping noise spreads across the waves as the Temporal Caste release their hold on each other and break into a charging sprint straight into the ocean. Serena turns to find Ervin, but her eyes land on Kai. The King's Guard have their tridents in the air, joining in with the maelstrom of voices. Kai winks at her again, sending her on her way.

She races to catch up to the group, taking her usual place at the rear. The shouts above sea are replaced by a new vigor under water as legs transform to fins. Those not used to the quick change take longer and fall behind. Kicking, then fluttering, everyone races toward the king.

Other members of Society slap their fins on the surface of the water. Some break free of the ocean, flipping into the air and back down again. Down below, Undine send out their signals, buzzing and tickling the Temporal Caste as they pass. The enthusiasm is infectious.

Serena picks up speed and opens up her arms. Her fingers skim the wake of water behind her caste mates. She follows as they angle up, then turn on their backs. Serena knows what is coming. It is the buildup to a line of jumps, one Undine after another, each performing some kind of acrobatics in midair. This isn't a tradition, but the maidens can't stop the rush of euphoria. They are like young Undine calflings, playing in the breakers during the high moon.

Through the fizz and bubbles, Serena can see the maiden in front of her surface, make a gentle arch through the sky, and dive back into the water. Serena smiles then streamlines, gaining even more speed. She bursts through the surface at the crest of a wave, pushing her even higher. Serena bends at the waist, wrapping her arms around the lower half of her tail. She summersaults three times before opening up her body.

Arms out, Serena hangs at the apex of her jump, suspended for a moment before the moon. The curve of her arms outline the orb, a perfect sphere albeit a sliver. Her head eclipses the bottom half, as if suspended at the solemn creature's mercy. She takes in the light it gives, then falls back to the ocean, filled with every last bit of brilliant karma the moon can deliver.

After a sleek dive, Serena resurfaces. Glowing hair drapes over her face, obscuring her vision. She flips it back, a carefree laugh escaping her lips. She settles, bobbing along the surface of the ocean near the whale-rock, when she realizes all eyes are on her. Even King Merrick, who is ready to announce The Choosing of the first Undine, stares with his mouth open.

"Sorry, I was just…" Serena's smile turns into a frown.

I was just happy, Serena finishes the sentence in her head.

She dips back below water where there aren't so many eyes and swims to the end of the line.

Thankfully, King Merrick's words command more attention than any triple pike can. Cordelia is first in line.

"Cordelia Swallow-Tail, you have been chosen to serve Society as an Orphanage Attendant."

A ripple of murmurs run through the Temporal Caste in front of Serena.

"Why Orphanage attendant?" Serena hears Sasha ask. "There are no orphans left—there are no calflings."

Another maiden elbows Sasha, gesturing to Serena behind them.

"Sorry," Sasha lifts her eyebrows at Serena. "I didn't mean…"

"It's okay," interrupts Serena.

The three maidens turn their attention back to the king and Cordelia.

"My second choice was Orphanage Attendant," Serena admits to the other maidens, her voice almost at a whisper. "Rayne wants to retire soon, and I guess someone needs to take over…just in case."

Sasha nods, looking back at the whale rock. "The orphanage was Cordelia's favorite shadow job. She’s the popular one, though—I always assumed she'd end up as Council Member Assistant."

"Now, go join your kinsmen and make proud the ancients who watch over us." King Merrick waves Cordelia away. Rayne retreats with her, her deep green scales complimenting Cordelia's burgundy, escorting her to the first night on the job.

The king calls forth three more caste members, including Sasha. They approach the rock together for assignment and receive garden duty. There are more whoops and hollers as they join the gardening crew and they all leave together for their first night. In a crowd as big as theirs, much of the evening will consist of a party, welcoming the new members into their lives.

Serena turns to look at the King's Guard still standing on the beach. Each has their gaze set on the cliffs, scouting for danger. All, except one. Murphy, Head of the Guard, watches the proceedings with sad eyes. There are no males in the Temporal Caste. No one to join the King's Guard this time—and most likely never again. Ervin was the last. Serena still hears rumors of the legendary party the night of his Choosing.

It will be nothing like hers. With luck, Mariam has made her special lemongrass tea. The last time Serena drank it she was pleasantly inebriated for hours, suggesting there is more more to the mixture than just lemongrass. Mariam and Serena ended up in the entrance pool to the archives, splashing and dunking each other.

Another caste member is sent away and now there is only one Undine left in front of Serena. Serena lifts herself farther from the water, preparing to ascend the rock more confident now that fewer Society members remain. As the Undine receives her placement from the king, Serena finds Mariam. The Records Keeper is observing from a distance, the same place Serena might find herself years from now, after she inherits the archives and seeks her own assistant.

"Serena Moon-Shadow," the king calls. His voice is softer now that it does not need to reach all of Society. The only Undine that remain, apart from the king, are Nerin, Zayla, and Mariam.

Serena transforms and ascends the rock, standing on the same level as the king. He scrutinizes her with a slight smile on his face. Most of the previous formality seems to have disappeared with the rest of her caste mates.

"Seems your formal name has some merit," says the king. "Your affinity with the moon is much…stronger than I've seen with any Undine."

Serena isn't sure what he means by this, but makes a mental note to research the connection between Undine and the moon when she gets to the archives.

"Let's get on with it, shall we?" The king says, clearing his throat.

Serena smiles with one final glance at Mariam.

"Serena Moon-Shadow, you have been chosen to serve Society as Werewolf Liaison."

Chapter Ten

Serena's polite smile freezes on her face, unable to move. Surely she heard him wrong.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that, your majesty?" She asks.

"Werewolf Liaison," he says again.

Serena's eyes snap up to his. There is no trace of humor there. She looks to Nerin and Zayla, standing below, then out to Mariam. No shock or surprise show on their faces. Zayla looks away, suddenly very interested in the water that crashes against the bottom of the whale-rock. Mariam manages to hold Serena's gaze, and the way her forehead wrinkles is heartbreaking. There is worry there, but Mariam will not do anything to prevent the assignment. If there was any special brew made, it will be used to drown away Mariam's sorrow that she will probably never get an assistant.

"I'd send you off with the formal words, to your group," the king says, "but there hasn't been a Werewolf Liaison since—"

"The Maiden Massacre," Serena finishes for him, looking back to Cliff Beach, where the last Werewolf Liaison was murdered. Blood pounds in her ears as she looks at the desolate beach. Despite the cold wind spraying droplets of icy ocean water at her back, her entire face goes hot.

"Remember, as a graduating Undine you are to remain with your chosen job through the next two nights as part of your initiation before you can return home for rest." King Merrick grows taller, lifting himself up on his tail and using his trident for help.

"My chosen job? I didn't choose this," Serena says, fighting back tears. She turns back to the king, trying to understand why the Undine hate her so much. "Is this one of punishments?"

"It is," says the king, his voice gruff.

"I'd thought yours would come last…" Serena trails off, her words catching in her throat. *And be the worst. But what could be worse than this?* She takes a deep breath.

I will not let him see me cry.

The king moves closer to Serena, looking out at Cliff Beach, where the King's Guard still stands in formation.

"Almost eighteen years ago, I watched my wife go to land with her protector to have our son. By the end of the night, both were dead, and I returned to the sea with the only survivor in my hands. A baby girl."

Serena looks at the king. His face is grim and wrinkles line the edges of his eyes. He is lost in his memories. "That night was, and will always be, a tragedy," the king's voice breaks. He takes a deep breath. "But like an underwater volcano, spewing poison and scorching the area, paths are created for new beginnings, rich with minerals. Amidst the destruction, there is hope."

Serena wipes her cheek with a shaky hand, tears finally bubbling over.

"Try not to think of this as your punishment, Serena." He puts his hand on her shoulder. It is heavy, with calloused fingers. "It is your destiny—and what you do with your calling could decide the fate of our kingdom."

The touch disconnects Serena from the increasing emotions of fear, anger, and sorrow. The king has never touched her before; she doubts he ever touches anyone. Body rigid with surprise, she glances at his large hand draped over her shoulder. He squeezes once, then lets his hand drop.

"Now, go and make proud the ancients who watch over you," says the king, gesturing to The Dry.

Serena follows his gaze to the beach, then up the cliffs to the forest and down to the ominous passageway leading to the rest of The Dry, which is shrouded in shadows.

A large wave crashes into the rock. Serena stumbles forward, almost pushed off. When she straightens and looks around her tiny island, King Merrick is gone.

Serena looks back to the beach. The guard is retreating into the water, now that the king has left. Ervin sees her still standing there and pauses, frowning. Murphy steps forward to whisper something to Ervin, who scratches his temple but continues into the water.

As the last of the guard disappear beneath the waves, sharpened spikes of a trident glisten in the moonlight in a final farewell. Then, Serena is alone. She takes a deep breath and dives into the water at the next swell. She drifts with the current, her body numb. The ceremonial words come to her, rolling around her head—unstoppable as the oscillating tide.

We are willing.

I'm not willing, thinks Serena. *At least not anymore.* Before, going to The Dry was an adventure, and an escape from Society. It doesn't hold the same allure when she is forced ashore.

We are prepared.

The picture of the bloody, dying maiden fills Serena's mind. It is one image of many in the stack of werewolf books Serena was charged with studying. What she thought was punishment for her close brush with the creatures was instead maybe actually meant to prepare her for her new role in Society.

We are Undine.

Serena snorts and saltwater rushes into her nose, burning her throat. Breaking the surface, water and foam sputter out of her mouth, nose, and gills. She crawls onto the beach, her transformation clumsy and almost as painful as her first time as a young Undine. Wave after wave forces her forward until she manages to pull herself far enough away from the unforgiving surges.

Sprawled out on the sand, she turns to look at the ocean.

Even our great mother is pushing me away, she thinks.

Serena puts her hand over her mouth, choking back a sob.

What you do with your calling will decide the fate of our kingdom.

One more deep breath and her gills settle, sealing shut against her neck. Serena rubs her face, smoothing away grimy sand, bitter seawater, and the creases in her forehead that threaten to remain permanently.

Standing up, Serena stares out at the ocean until her legs stop shaking. One small, dark cloud moves across the sky. The moon blinks out behind it, then comes back, as if it is winking at Serena.

One side of Serena's mouth tips up in a scrutinizing smile. *Fine, if one world doesn't want me, I'll make another my home.*

She turns toward the passageway. Streaks of moonlight don't stretch very far past the tops of the cliffs to help light the narrow corridor in between. Crickets call out from the shadows, beckoning for Serena to join them.

"I'm coming," she mumbles back to them.

Serena brings her scales forward, letting them crawl down her arms and cover her knuckles. One by one, they emerge past her neck and over her temples until they blend in with her hair line. At her elbows, knees, and ankles, the scales stack on top of one another, providing extra protection

while still giving her room to move. The bulky weight will slow her down, but the scales give her confidence. Donning her body armor, Serena stands a little straighter, shoulders pulled back.

Serena gains control over her bioluminescent features. Her hair dims, returning to its natural dark black, perfect for blending in with the shadowed forest. She increases the strength of her reflective guanine crystals spaced throughout her plated body.

As she walks forward, the tiny mirrors match the sand at her feet, until they flair with color.

She pauses, eyes drawn to something gleaming gold standing out amidst the taupe sand—a trident. Serena walks over and bends down to pick it up, keeping her eyes on the tree line. The decorative red tassels tied around the long handle brush Serena's hand. It is Kai's weapon. The Second in Command wouldn't leave it behind by mistake.

Serena looks behind her. She has never seen a guard without his trident. *Maybe an excuse for him to come back?* Hope blooms in her chest. She scans the surface of the ocean, but it remains barren all the way to the moon.

She sighs, looking back at the trident. *No one is coming back.*

Moonlight flickers off the sharpened tips as she turns the trident in her hand. Serena grasps the heavy weapon, fumbling to get one end tucked under her arm. She walks forward again, ripping off the red tassels and leaving them behind on the sand; they won't blend as well in The Dry. Serena traverses the passageway and enters the forest, her body armor reflecting the long lines of dark browns and greens of the trees.

After a short, steady jog, she climbs atop a rock, using it to jump onto a fallen tree trunk. Sprinting, Serena follows the incline of the trunk, leaping off the end to take to the trees where the wolves won't follow.

Her fingers only graze the lowest branch, then she lands back on the ground. The trident weighs her down and renders one arm useless for catching branches. She readjusts her grip on the trident and tries again. A complete miss.

Eyes darting around her surroundings, Serena squints into the darkness. *No wolves, at least not that I can smell. But I need to get into the trees.* She looks at the trident and lets out a frustrated huff. She considers ditching it, but it is her only real weapon.

She lifts up the trident so it is parallel to the ground. Widening her stance and taking aim, Serena extends her free arm as a guide. She leans back and thrusts her arm forward. Her hips rotate at the same time and she releases the trident. A resounding thud echoes through the forest as the weapon pierces wood. Without hesitating, Serena runs, plants her feet, and jumps. Her hands grip the long stem of the trident, extended parallel just a few feet under a branch.

Wind slides across her scales as her legs swing up. When Serena can see her toes above the trident, she lets go. Her body arcs and she thuds on the branch above the trident. She bends down and tugs on her weapon. It is deep, and won't budge. Serena wraps her legs around the branch and hangs upside down in order to use both hands.

When the log releases its hold, Serena runs her hand over the three punctures already bleeding sap.

"I am sorry," she whispers to the tree. "But I would be grateful for your shelter tonight."

It is the same thing Undine say when forcing their way into thick coral in an emergency, and it feels right to say it now.

Serena pulls herself on top of the branch. She leans her head back against the bark, breathing hard. Crisp air blows through the trees, pressing against her breastplate and she is grateful for her armor. But despite the extra comfort, dark shadows move in the wind, and the trees are restless, as if they can't wait to see how Serena's night plays out.

She sits on the branch, pulling her knees into her chest—trying to ward away the vulnerability that settles there. She looks at the trident once again.

At least Kai cares.

A new resolve sets in. Serena swallows, convincing herself to suspend judgment against the king and Society, at least until she has more answers as to why this particular punishment has been given to her.

Taking a deep breath, she looks up. The branches up here are plentiful, as opposed to near the ground where they are sparse and flimsy. Serena climbs with ease, using the trident's stem as leverage when she can. She stops before she reaches the weaker branches, settling into an especially large crook where branch meets trunk. The wood is smoothed down at the fork and there is a small clearing going straight to the open sky just above it.

Serena brushes away remnants of a former nest and curls into the tree, trying to imagine she is in her sleeping cove. Her mind drifts around her cave until she can almost smell the bitter kelp that grows out of her caged experiments on the floor. She hears the tide trickling in, beating against jars and her dry box. Serena fingers the charm still hanging from her necklace, wishing she left her mother's jewelry behind.

Turning on her other side, bark grabs hold of her scales, threatening to tear them off. She shifts carefully, rolling onto her shoulder so she is facing the thick center of the tree. The moon works hard to pierce its canopy. Slivers of light run down the craggy bark and across Serena's hips and legs.

With a slender finger, Serena traces the maze of lines zigzagging throughout the tree's outer shell. Just like her own scales, the dark, reddish-brown bark is smooth when she runs the pad of her finger one way, and rough the other direction.

"We aren't so different, you and me," she whispers to the tree. "Except maybe you have more friends."

Branches from its neighbors wave at her in the wind. One side of Serena's mouth curls up in a lopsided smile, and she waves back.

Chapter Eleven

A scream echoes through the forest, sliding down Serena's spine and leaving goose bumps in its wake. She climbs out of her tree and follows the sound. Pushing aside thick shrubs, Serena steps into a clearing. The scream subsides into gurgling coughs. The smells of rotten seaweed, wet dog, and dank earth greet her. She puts her hand to her mouth, trying not to gag.

Her toes hit warm liquid and she immediately draws them back, still peering at the pool of red goo, made darker by the brown soil beneath it. Serena's eyes follow the trickle feeding the pool. Forging its own path over the ground, the stream bends around rocks, collecting in depressions and dripping off…claws.

Yellowed talons tap, causing ripples in in the pool of blood. Matted fur, stinking of the coppery liquid of a recent kill, covers the beast. Serena takes a step back.

The beast emits a growl, forceful enough that it causes spit to fly out from in between his pointy teeth and splatter at Serena's feet. Fear roots her to the spot, even as the blood crawls closer to her feet. Instead of moving past, it seems to pool there, rising higher to cover the tops of Serena's toes.

"Help me," a voice whispers.

Serena's eyes snap up. The beast shifts, leaning back onto his hind legs, ready to pounce. He growls again, its stinking breath caressing Serena's bare skin. She shivers, goose bumps now popping up on her arms. Her scales must have retracted while she was sleeping, and try as she might, she cannot convince them to re-emerge.

"Help me," the voice is louder now, more desperate.

Serena tears her eyes from the beast and looks down, at the thing it has attacked. Dark hair, almost just as matted as the beast's, cover a face. But there is no mistaking the bioluminescent glow, winking out as the Undine maiden fights for her last moments of life.

Serena swallows. The blood at her feet is up to her ankles now. The maiden stirs, angling her head back.

Eyes glued to the wolf, Serena steps to the side of the maiden, trying to see her face. The wolf counters her steps, moving off of the maiden and onto the ground, revealing midnight blue scales.

Serena takes in a sharp breath, her eyes snapping back to the Undine's face. She pushes herself up on one elbow, extending her other hand.

"Help…" The rest of her tangled hair falls away from her face.

Serena looks directly into her own eyes.

The wolf lunges, not out, but down. Finishing off his prey, he tears a wide gash in her neck. Serena screams, the sound amplified by an identical shrill shriek—but one dies out, while another grows louder.

Serena snaps her mouth shut when the wolf looks up, fresh blood coating his face and teeth—his snout caught in a flap of skin hanging open from the neck. As he snarls, his lips turn up to bare more fang.

Serena shakes her head from side to side and tries to step back. She can’t. The pool of blood wraps like long tendrils around her legs, all the way up to her thighs. It bites into her skin, causing her to bleed—mingling her own blood with it so she can't distinguish between the two.

One more growl, and the wolf leaps with his paws extended out in front of him. His mouth opens wide, aiming directly for Serena's neck.

* * *

Serena cries out, throwing her arms in front of her. Rolling to the side, her sturdy platform gives way to nothingness, and she falls. A branch clips her feet, sending her into a spin. Another one catches her midsection, stopping her, but it cannot hold under her weight. It cracks and she falls again, landing on another branch with a thud. Breath escapes her lungs under a forced wheeze and does not come back for several painful seconds.

Her eyes fly open at the sound of twigs and sticks hitting soft dirt. She is too close to the ground. Tree tops spin through the branches above her. Groaning, Serena forces herself to sit up, wrapping one leg around the branch to keep steady. One hand goes to the pounding on the side of her head, the other to the pain in her ribs. Her whole body begins to shake.

Come on, Werewolf Liaison, get up, Serena coaxes herself. She turns, peering over the branch to scan the ground. A blue jewel sparkles back at her—her mom's necklace, splayed out over the shrubs below.

"Damn," Serena says out loud.

She looks up, shielding her eyes from the harsh morning sunlight that filters down from the canopy. Leaves flutter from side to side and branches sway in the wind, helping the sun to play a nasty game of peekaboo.

Serena squints, realizing she must have slept through half the morning. From the first year in school, young Undine are taught never to be caught in daylight. It is when Ungainlies are most likely to prowl the earth and sea, harvesting what they can. Besides—the sunlight hurts. And yet, the king's words were clear; Serena is to remain with her chosen job for two nights. One down, one to go.

Her weapon remains high up in her overnight nest, but she hesitates, leaving one of her only family heirlooms exposed on the ground.

A quick hop down and quick hop up.

She squats and her fingers curl in, anticipating the jump. A foreign smell drifts past her nose, and she pauses.

Werewolf.

Serena barely has time to scoot back to the sturdy center of the branch when she hears a twig snap. Her eyes dart from one spot to another, scanning the ground, trying to pinpoint the noise. Light filtering down creates sharp glares and distorted sunspots in front of Serena's eyes, blurring out part of the landscape.

I need to see.

The sound and smell of heavy breathing below are enough to convince her to stay put. From around the base of her tree, a paw—and another. Then there is a long muzzle, followed by light brown fur.

Her heart catches in her throat. Werewolves *can* transform outside of the full moon—in broad daylight, nonetheless. The light brown fur on his muzzle also covers the rest his body, except for a crescent-shaped patch of beige hair on the side of his face. The rest of the wolf emerges into Serena's sight. He is twice the size of the average Vancouver wolf. Unnaturally bulky muscles wrap around his shoulders. His back legs are larger and more defined than those in the front, and long, yellowed claws extend from every paw.

The wolf passes over her mother's necklace, its tail swinging once to the right. When it disappears behind the tree again, the necklace is in its mouth.

"Hey!" Serena shouts. "Give that back!"

She swallows hard. There is no answer but the wind blowing through the trees. Serena turns around, balancing on the branch, looking for the wolf. "Hello?"

Another twig snaps.

Her head whips around and the wolf emerges again. This time the chain of her mother's necklace hangs out between sharp teeth. Altering his path, he steps away from the tree and sits. Head cocked to the side, he looks up at her, allowing the necklace to fall from his mouth. The charm lands with a soft thud, and the chain pools on top of it.

The wolf leans to the side, then digs his nose into one of his back legs. When he finishes, he looks back at Serena, running his long tongue over his snout. Serena wrinkles her own nose.

"So are you going to give it back?" Serena asks. She risks moving forward along the branch to see him better.

He paws at the necklace, then scoots back.

"Oh, no. You're not going to lure me out of this tree," Serena says. Besides the wolfsbane garden, it is the one safe place in the forest.

The creature emits a short whine, then scoots back even farther, and lays down on his belly. His ears twitch to the sounds around him and though he faces Serena, his eyes wander to the side.

Serena stands, studying the wolf's reaction. He barely seems to notice. She reaches above her, breaking off a stick as long as her arm. She throws it like a trident, so it sails over the distance separating them and lands nearby. The wolf looks at the stick, ears still twitching. His mouth hangs open and he pants, tongue lolling over the side. He looks more like one of the small dogs the Ungainly bring with them to the beach than a ferocious beast.

"You paint quite the deceiving picture," Serena says, hands on her hip. "But it won't work." The images of murderous werewolves in her books have made a permanent impression.

The wolf licks his nose again and snaps his mouth once, then twice. Finally he picks up the necklace and trots toward Serena's tree. Before he gets there, he turns, angling away. The wolf dips his head, then thrusts it toward Serena. The necklace flies out of his mouth, landing at the base of the tree. He looks at Serena one more time out of the corner of his eye, then disappears into the shrubbery, his wagging tail grazing over a patch of blooming purple flowers.

His steady footsteps fade in the distance, like he wants her to know exactly how far away he is. Without hesitation, Serena jumps down. In one smooth motion she grabs the necklace and leaps back to safety. Her heart rate doesn't even quicken until after she is back in the tree.

Wiping the slobber off the charm, she watches the shadows behind the bushes where the wolf disappeared. *It's not the same one that chased me the night of the excursion,* she thinks. That one had darker fur, almost black, and was much larger.

I will have to focus on this one when I come back. Serena freezes. *When I come back.* She is actually considering reliving this nightmare. She takes a deep breath and stands, replacing her mother's necklace around her neck. *Which means I'll need to be better prepared.*

She climbs the tree back to her nesting spot and picks up the trident.

I need to train.

She turns, spotting a dead branch on the next tree and aims for it. It hits wood, the trident's handle reverberating with the impact. Serena frowns, it isn't the exact spot she intended. She climbs through the trees, crossing over on the thickest branches to retrieve her spear. Spotting another dead branch, she tries again. A flock of birds take flight nearby as she misses, although her aim has improved. She switches hands often, practicing until the sun has moved across the span of the sky. She only aims for targets that won't impact the trees. She has seen too many Ungainlies scale redwood trunks with spikes in their shoes, a trail of bleeding holes left in their wake. Soon after, disease, insect infestation, and mold settle in. In many cases, the trees never recover.

By evening, both Serena’s speed and accuracy are much better, even as sore and tired as she is. Still high in the trees, she retracts much of her arm and shoulder armor to rub the affected areas. She longs for the cool, healing waters of the ocean. She can hear them now, beating against the shore and calling her name.

Now you want me back? She grits her teeth. *One more night.*

Serena looks into the sky, seeking the moon. It is just now gaining its light.

"Just you and me tonight," she says out loud, touching the charm on her necklace. "Hopefully."

Chapter Twelve

The wolfsbane garden is simple enough to reach through the trees, and Serena only comes to the ground when sturdy branches become sparse. Sprinting with her trident at the ready, Serena pauses at the tree line, trying to hear past her own heavy breathing. Nothing.

Serena skirts the garden checking for footprints though she can't imagine werewolves would dare go near it. Then again, she had also believed that a werewolf couldn’t transform without a full moon.

These nights, anything goes.

Serena calls upon full body armor. Scales cover every last inch of her feet, legs, torso, and hands. Her movements are slow and weighted, but it is necessary when walking amidst the poisonous flowers.

Rainfall combined with shade from the canopy above keeps the ground cool and damp. A lingering bumblebee hovers nearby.

"Go home, it's closing time," Serena whispers to it.

Though Wolfsbane is a threatened species, growing only in damp woods and high elevations, Undine gardeners have been successful in yielding longer blooming periods for the sulfur-yellow flowers.

Serena picks up an abandoned Undine basket. *I wonder if the maiden that found and reported the footprints will have enough courage to come retrieve her basket, or ever return to work, for that matter.* Gardening in The Dry is one of the more dangerous occupations for the Undine, other than Werewolf Liaison, and maybe the King's Guard. There isn’t likely to be any other visitors to the secluded patch of land tonight, though. Gardeners are only required to come above seas to tend the plants a few nights during every moon cycle. It’s one of the perks that entice Undine to pick the job; they can enjoy free time the rest of the month.

Serena chooses a spot and begins filling her basket. The nectar of the flower causes severe itching and dermatitis on skin of Ungainlies, Undine, and werewolf alike. Ingesting concentrated wolfsbane sap can be fatal for any species.

Serena twirls the long stem of a flower. Yellow, bell-shaped blooms hang down the stem, overlapping each other. The ancients used the flower

in the spell to create werewolves when the Undine needed protectors. Emerging only during a full moon, the wolves stood watch willingly while Undine maidens consummated and gave birth.

Slowly, Serena pokes one finger inside a flower, pushing aside petals to view the hollow spur at the apex. A drop of nectar slides onto the tip of her finger.

She gasps, dropping the flower and immediately bends to plunge her finger into the earth. The soil absorbs the nectar, cleansing her scaled extremity. *Don't be stupid*, she reminds herself.

Serena begins picking flowers more carefully this time. Once her basket is full, she sets off for her nesting tree. If the wolf is to return, this is where he would seek her. Working the next few hours, Serena labors in the painstakingly precise task of placing each stem where the flower is visible but won't be blown away from the wind.

Serena places several layers of wolfsbane surrounding the base of her tree. Moving up the trunk, she wiggles the stems in between cracks in the bark. Next are the lowest branches, where she learns to weave the stems together in a tight braid. Flowers wrap around the branches, plaited around as a living lace. She completes the ward by adorning the branches above her, just in case werewolves have learned the trick of climbing trees.

Serena settles into the crook of the tree, the same spot from which she observed the werewolf earlier. In her basket, there are only a few flowers left. Before boredom can lure her to sleep, she weaves more stems together. Scales make her fingers fat and clumsy, but she persists, slowly knitting together another tight lace of poison. This time, she loops it around the three prongs of her trident, arranging it so a large bulb hangs from each of the tips.

Finished, Serena rests her head back against the trunk, still blinking away sleep. She tries to recall what happened the last few times a wolf came to her. When she ventured above seas to remove overgrowth from the archive holes, she had sent out a call in the rain. It was her attempt at echolocation that worked so well underwater, in order to see better above. She did it again, last night. Though she heard movement before, the wolf did not show himself until after she made the call.

She sits up straight, a revelation running through her head. Maybe Undine sounds have a different purpose above water. There had to be some way they could call upon their protectors.

Serena licks her lips. *It's worth a shot*, she thinks. She sends out her signal. It comes out as a soft titter. The last few notes are elongated and nasal. The quality of the waves that come back are distorted and hazy. She turns her head, listening for signs that it has worked.

Silence.

The forest is just lightening with the rising sun, making it harder for Serena to see. Soon she will be at a full disadvantage, with alternating light and shadow playing tricks on her eyes.

She tries again, turning her head as she sends her sounds out. It is louder this time. If the wolf is anywhere nearby, he has to hear it. Before she even stops her song, movement in the brush catches her eye. She doesn't need to peer closer to see the two, glowing red eyes staring back at her. Has she called another one?

A growl answers back, and through the dim light, she can see the gleam of sharp fangs. This isn't the docile pup she encountered last night. If it is, he is no longer in a playful mood.

Fine, thinks Serena as she grips her trident. *No more playing.*

The wolf emerges from his cover, head low to the ground, ears pinned back. He slinks forward, eyes never leaving Serena.

"I wouldn't come any closer. Not unless you want to wear that pelt permanently," she says. Further contact with wolfsbane would complete the wolf's transformation, forcing a permanent change to animal form.

Sunlight hits his fur, showing off his coloring. It is the same wolf that stole, then returned, her mother's necklace. He continues to slink forward, his crescent-shaped mark on the side of his face glinting under the moonlight. Serena will have little chance of evading his jump if he risks crossing the line of wolfsbane.

I could move higher up the tree, where he could never reach me.

Serena dismisses the thought. *I don't want another chase, I have to stand my ground.*

Before she can convince herself otherwise, Serena jumps down. Landing softly with her trident at the ready, a puff of yellow flowers float up around her like a ring of smoke. Before the last one settles on the ground, the wolf lunges. Serena fights back the instinct to turn tail and run. She steels herself and steps forward to meet him.

They each take two long strides toward the outer ring of yellow. Serena extends the trident and cries out at the top of her lungs. The wolf freezes,

right at the line, with the three sharp points of her weapon centimeters from his eyes.

Serena holds the heavy, golden trident steady, willing her arms not to shake. The wolf glares at her.

"I wouldn't come any closer," Serena says again, this time in a lower, more controlled voice.

The wolf hasn't moved. Serena jerks the spear forward, intending to intimidate.

He pulls his lips back in a snarl. Serena jabs again and he returns a sharp yelp. The wolfsbane on the tip of the trident is at the wolf's nose. His nostrils flare in distaste. The forest has gone silent as the two creatures consider their next move. Layers of scales make Serena's arms heavy. Another few moments of this and her weakness will begin to show.

Finally, the werewolf takes a step back. Serena lowers her elbows, leaving the trident aimed at his face.

He raises his eyebrows at Serena; it is her turn to yield.

Serena lets the back end of her trident drop so her weapon is now parallel with her body. Drawing her shoulders back and her chin high, she clicks her heels together, keeping her toes pointed slightly to the outside. It is a stance worthy of the King's Guard.

The dog seems satisfied. He sits down, then shuffles his front paws together and puffs out his chest.

Serena peers closer. *Is he making fun of me?*

She presses her lips together and allows her shoulders to relax. "I am Serena Moon-Shadow, Werewolf Liaison of the Undine Kingdom. I propose a temporary truce, in order that we may confer."

The wolf snorts, looking away.

"But in our Ungainly forms." Serena swallows. "You retract your fangs and I'll do the same with my scales."

The wolf is still looking away, eyes following a fly buzzing too close to his face. He snaps at the fly, misses, then licks his jaws.

"And," continues Serena, tone hesitant, "I want to thank you…for returning my necklace." Her fingers touch the charm at her neck. She still doubts if he can understand speech as a werewolf. She lowers her voice even more; it is only a whisper now. "It was my mother's."

His eyes drift back to her and he nods.

He can understand.

Her eyes go wide. She clears her throat. "So please, can we talk?"

He cocks his head to the side, as if he is considering.

"Look, I'll leave my weapon." Serena rests the trident against the trunk of the tree. "We'll keep our distance. I'll be in my tree and you stay outside of the wolfsbane."

The wolf doesn't make a move, so Serena takes her eyes from it briefly enough to jump up to a low branch. She pulls herself up, creeping forward just a bit. The tips of the trident are within reach. She could grab it and pull it up if need be.

The wolf is still sitting, but at least he appears interested.

"I only have until the next moon," Serena says, light sarcasm touching her words. The sun has just barely risen.

Serena resists a smile when the wolf snorts again.

With a long yawn, the wolf gets his hind legs under him and stands. He leans back, head dipping down and rear raising for a stretch. Then he walks.

He circles the outline of wolfsbane, occasionally stopping to sniff. Lingering where the gaps between each bloom are wider, he is searching for the weak link.

Serena shifts, glancing at her trident.

The wolf circles the tree once, tail swishing as he goes. On the second time around, he disappears into the only spot behind the tree Serena cannot follow with her eyes and he does not emerge.

Instead, Serena hears hollow popping, a rustle over the dead leaves on the ground, and then a groan.

Serena bobs her head back and forth on each side of the tree, straining to get a glimpse. She sees a tail and then nothing.

"What are you doing?" Serena asks. The words come out too quick, giving away her fear.

She opens her mouth to ask again when she hears footsteps. The wolf is circling back around. Serena grips the branch, angling closer to her trident. The ground is almost the same color as the wolf's fur, but she squints, trying to catch a glimpse of long, yellowing claws.

Instead, she finds toes. Ungainly toes. Human toes.

There are ten of them. Transfixed, Serena follows the smooth, tanned skin up. Ankles move and flex as he continues to walk. Serena blushes as she stares at his calves. Next are the knees, then…

The man drapes a cape over his shoulders and pulls the opening closed.
Serena meets his eyes. "What—?"
"I am obliging your request, mermaid," he answers.

Chapter Thirteen

Nodding his head in a semi-formal bow, the now-human wolf stands, facing Serena. Having stopped in a dim section of the forest, Serena's eyes, well-adjusted for darker waters, have an easier time seeing him.

His hair is his only feature still resembling his werewolf form. It’s the same color as his light brown fur. It sits parted down the middle and hangs just past his ears with a few stray strands curling in, framing hazel eyes.

"They're not red." Serena blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

"Huh?" he asks, eyebrows furrowed.

"Nothing. It's just…" Serena clears her throat, pausing. "We don't like to be called mermaids."

His lips turn up in a half smile.

"Well, Serena Moon-Shadow of the Undine Kingdom…what did you do wrong to deserve the title of Werewolf Liaison?" The man remains outside the wolfsbane circle, his cape made of thick material and tied close at the waist. When it billows out with the breeze, Serena can see his posture is relaxed.

Serena sits back on her branch, allowing one leg to dangle. She drops her hand on the far side of the branch, closer toward the trident as a precaution. "It is my chosen responsibility," she answers.

His forehead crinkles. "You chose this?"

Her jawline tightens as she plucks the stem of a flower from one of the braids, and twirls it in her fingers. "Not exactly."

His eyes drift, studying everything from her trident to the swing of her leg, down her arms to the flower she still twirls in her hand.

"What?" she asks.

He stands taller than the average Ungainly male. The cape is pulled tight over his upper arms and wide shoulders, revealing defined but not bulky muscles. He turns, seeking out a stump, and sits. "When were you plannin' to fulfill your part of the bargain?" He motions to her legs with a jerk of his chin.

She looks down. Her whole body is still scaled. She did promise to retract them, which poses a slight problem. Even the Undine cannot touch

wolfsbane with their bare skin and escape unscathed, a secret the werewolf need not know.

Serena shifts on the branch, standing to place her feet in between the braids of poisonous flowers. Petals from the branch above graze her hair. She tries to hunch without being too obvious about it, and is all too aware of the trident, which is now out of reach.

Slowly, she retracts the scales on her feet. They disappear in a chain up to just above her knees, where she stops.

He raises one eyebrow again.

"I failed to bring my own cape," Serena explains.

He nods, and gestures with his hand for her to continue. Serena reveals the skin on her hands, wrists and arms. Next, she bares her shoulders and the upper portion of her chest. The charm slides from scales to skin.

Serena touches her necklace again; the gesture is becoming a nervous habit. She steps forward, placing her feet carefully, until the branch begins to dip under her weight. Serena lowers herself, straddling the branch.

The man shifts on his stump and opens his mouth, about to speak.

Unwilling to lose the upper hand, Serena speaks first. "Care to introduce yourself, or shall I just call you Hound?"

"We prefer werewolf," he looks at her from under thick eyebrows. "Or just weres. But you can call me Liam. Or, that is…" He stands, smoothing out his cape. "Liam of the Clan Werich."

Serena purses her lips, "No title?"

"Well, I work the night shift at the bowlin' alley."

"What does that mean?"

"It is a gamin' place, for humans." One side of his mouth curls up in a smile. "Maybe I can take you sometime."

Serena calls his bluff. "Can I bring my wolfsbane?"

Now he laughs out loud, small wrinkles appearing around his eyes.

Serena leans forward on the branch, her belly touching rough bark. She folds her arms underneath her and rests her chin in one hand.

Liam composes himself, sliding his fingers through his hair. "And as Werewolf Liaison, are you goin’ to extend an invitation for me to visit you?"

"I don't think so, Liam of Clan Werich. You would not survive the games we play in the ocean." Serena wonders how a jellyfish sting would affect a werewolf.

"Of that, I have no doubt." He smiles as he turns, taking a few steps away from her.

Serena pushes up from the branch. "Where are you going?"

Tracing the outer edge of wolfsbane circle, Liam walks around to the back of the tree. "To bed. To dream of tridents and yellow flowers, and mer…" He drifts off, catching himself in time. "I mean the Great Kingdom of the Undine."

"When will we meet again?" Serena asks.

"I will listen for your call, Serena Moon-Shadow. And maybe next time you can come down from your tree, little bird," he says, disappearing from sight.

"Liam, wait!" Serena calls. "I have more questions!" Serena racks her brains for a more substantial excuse for him to stay. "And I'm going to need proof that I met you."

There is another rustle in the thick brush, and as quickly as it disappeared last time, Liam's tail reappears. Liam leaps out of the shrubbery in full werewolf form, his cape nowhere to be seen. Pausing by his stump, he leans to one side and his hind leg comes up, claws extended. He scratches himself along his ribs, hard and quick. After turning to look at Serena one last time, he trots away.

Serena listens as his footsteps recede. Once she is sure he is a fair distance away and still moving, she scales her feet and jumps down from the tree. Grabbing her trident and leaving the safety of her circle to approach the stump, Serena bends down in the grass, spotting a small mass of light brown fur.

Chapter Fourteen

When Serena returns to the kingdom, Assembly is already in session. She slips into the Great Hall, taking her place in the shadows, unnoticed. Squinting, she can see the whites of King Merrick's eyes, they are so wide with disbelief—a stark contrast to his red cheeks. "What is the purpose of littering the Great Hall with dead plants?"

The young Undine, recently given the title of Scientist Assistant at The Choosing, does not expect his temper. She steps back, half turning—on the verge of bolting.

She catches the eye of Evandre, the Head Scientist. Judging by the glare he gives, no amount of bolting would help the young Undine.

"Answer your king, please," Nerin prods.

"It's just…I didn't realize," the Undine maiden continues to stutter. "I thought maybe the court wasn't aware."

"Not aware that half my kingdom is crumbling to dust?" The king sits forward on his throne, hands so tight on the armrests that the chair itself is on the verge of crumbling. "Not aware that coral, the very lifeblood of our food source, is disappearing around the globe?"

"I'm sorry, your majesty." The Undine bends in an unsure curtsey. Now she is the one with the flushed cheeks. "I've just never been so far from the Great Hall and…was shocked at the dead coral fields."

The king leans back, rubbing his eyes. "Maybe I should mandate Society borders just so my time isn't wasted whenever a new Undine discovers the coral fields," he mumbles, glancing at Evandre.

"It wouldn't matter," Serena's voice booms from the back of the room. All eyes in the court turn to her. Bracing herself for an onslaught of attention, she walks forward, releasing many of her scales that armored her body above seas. One hand holds Kai's trident, the other is balled into a fist, scales protecting the fur inside.

The back of her neck itches as maidens watch her walk the path to the front. *If I can sing in front of everyone, if I can face a werewolf, then I can do this.*

The king sits back in his throne. "Why?" he huffs. "Because you would cross the closed border anyway?"

"No." Serena approaches Assembly at the front of the Great Hall. "Because even the corals that decorate our own mountain are beginning to show signs of decline."

The king grimaces. From behind the table Evandre holds up a finger. Before either can speak, a flash of metal catches their attention.

Serena twirls the trident so the handle faces out. She takes aim and tosses it toward Kai. The Second in Command has only to extend a hand to catch it. In one smooth motion, he brings it upright to the position of attention against his body.

"I thank you for your protection," Serena tells him.

Kai nods, a slight, almost indistinguishable bob of his head. He stands rigid at attention next to Murphy, but his eyes go soft, lingering too long on her face.

Heat blossoms in Serena's abdomen, and she doesn't know why. It rises to her chest, and she has to look away before it reaches her cheeks.

"I have a request," Serena turns back to the king. His cold eyes bore into her, and she has to quell the urge to hunch her shoulders, or run from the room completely. "For my own trident and possibly other weapons. And training."

Nerin answers, "The King's Guard couldn't possibly have time—"

"As you say," interrupts King Merrick. "Anything more?"

Serena clears her throat, forcing her hands back to her sides. "I have come to speak of my chosen…" she drifts off, deciding to change the wording. "My given position."

"You cannot be reassigned." The king sighs, leaning back in his throne and rubbing his temples. First the corals, then this. The Temporal Caste is not taking to their assigned Choosing easily.

Nerin places her hand on the armrest of the throne. She looks natural there, her presence to the left of the king reminding Serena of the symbiotic relationship of a spotted goby and hard-nosed shrimp. Serena scrutinizes the pair at the throne. She wonders which is the protective goby and which is the domestic shrimp.

Folding her hands in front of her, Serena tries to exude patience, and confidence. "Had I wanted reassignment, I wouldn't need weapons—nor the training for them."

Nerin shakes her head once. Even if the king is in the wrong, it is bad etiquette to make it obvious. Serena takes a deep breath. "I came to find

out my purpose of the assignment."

"Your purpose?" asks the king.

"The title 'liaison' suggests cooperative contact. Though, maybe that is just upholding the old name. If I'm meant to look for weaknesses, or perform as a spy because you intend to attack, please tell me. I need to know where to focus my efforts."

The Great Hall goes quiet as the king rubs his upper lip. "Suppose I consider the point moot?"

"Why?" asks Serena.

"Well," the king leans back in his chair, his fins give a casual flip. "Maybe it is best to wait and see if you can actually make contact. It may take months, possibly years, for each of our species to earn trust and open up a conversation with—"

Serena extends her hand in front of her. It is still balled in a fist, covered in scales. She slowly retracts the scales to reveal thin, tight fingers. When she is sure every pair of eyes in the Great Hall is on her fist, she opens it. Brown, wiry hairs float to the ground in front of her.

The council members lean forward.

Nerin is the first to speak. "They could be from anything. One of us, even."

"Do you see them glowing?" Serena asks. Everyone knows what happens to fresh cut Undine hair.

No one moves, almost as if they are afraid to approach the beast's fur.

Serena rolls her eyes. "Smell it."

Nerin glances at the king. He, too, is leaning forward in his chair. He nods to her. Nerin steps forward and bends down to pick up one strand. With a shaky hand, she brings it to her nose.

"So again I ask, are they enemies or allies?" Serena meets the king's eyes, demanding the answer.

The king does not speak right away. Finally, after a long pause, he asks for everyone to leave. The council exchanges confused looks.

"I said go!" the king's voice booms through the cave.

Everyone jumps at King Merrick's bellow, including Serena. The room moves to action as the council and the audience shuffles to the exit. Serena half turns, expecting to be told to join them. She looks back at Nerin, who hasn't moved from the king's side. Nerin pins Serena to the spot with her stare. So they are both to stay, then.

When the cavern has cleared, Serena swears she can still hear the king's shout bouncing off the walls. A small drop of sweat trickles from the hairline at her neck down her back. The confidence she walked in with is quickly draining.

"I apologize for my gruff manner," says the king. "It's been a long few…" He glances at Nerin. "Years."

Serena peers closer at the wrinkles around his eyes. She's never noticed them before.

"Our world is changing, Serena Moon-Shadow. The werewolf packs in The Dry are no longer our biggest threat."

Serena glances down at the line of dead corals at her toes.

The king continues, "Though some in our council will still have me believe that."

Who? wonders Serena. *The King's Guard? Kai did leave me the trident.*

Serena realizes the king is looking down at his tail. It spirals into an unnatural twist at the bottom toward the fins. A long, white scar follows the spiral. Scales on either side of the scar are lumped on top of each other, like they have reached a border they cannot cross, yet they insist on trying.

It is because of the werewolves that he cannot take his Ungainly form. They have scarred him for life. For more than a decade, werewolves have chased Undine back into the sea. They killed his wife and son, and have prevented any maiden from conceiving since.

The king finally speaks. "Our situation is becoming desperate. We have tried hiding from the wolves, and we have tried fighting—losing most of our male population in the process. We need to take back our beaches. I implore you to seek an amenable relationship with the clan. However, if that cannot be done, find a time when their defenses are weak, so we can mate on the beaches." The king leans forward, fixing Serena with a hard stare. "Do not let your guard down in The Dry for one second. They are not to be trusted."

Nerin lays her hand on the king's shoulder. The intimate move shocks Serena more than the king's words. Nerin looks away, but her hand remains —her thumb rubbing back and forth over the material of the king's tunic.

The king straightens and takes a deep breath. "So there you have it. Be safe and be smart. Do what you do best and observe. Get to know them, and report everything back to us."

Serena rubs her temples. *Easier said than done. I'm going to need more wolfsbane.*

"Anything more?" asks the king for a second time.

Serena's hands drop to her sides. "Yes, there is," she says.

The king raises one eyebrow.

"I request permission to access the King's Library." Serena holds her breath. Very few are given access to the restricted library, but it contains information regarding werewolf origins. *Maybe something from their past can help me figure out how to move forward.*

The king and Nerin exchange another glance.

"For what purpose?" asks Nerin.

"In order to fulfill my duties as Werewolf Liaison," says Serena.

The king leans forward, his bright blue eyes boring through Serena. "Request denied."

Chapter Fifteen

"Ugh!" Serena shouts out, banging her first on the wall inside her cave. "Waste of time." One sole echo repeats her words back to her, a reminder of how empty her cave is.

Bending to her experiments, Serena peers into a jar of sea urchins, attempting to distract herself. The few eggs skimming the surface are no longer white. Edges drooping, they have gone flat and are pale yellow. They are all dead.

"This is what is going to happen to us." Serena stands and turns away, her feet splashing around in ankle-deep water.

We should be protecting our home, not romping around with werewolves.

Rage bubbles up inside. Her arms shake and her cheeks grow hot. Without thinking, she rips the charm from her neck and throws it. The necklace clinks against the unforgiving cave wall, then drops to the floor. The outer casing splits in two and the charm slips from its barred prison.

Shocked out of her anger, Serena drops to her knees near the charm, picking it up to wipe grime from its smooth surface. Tears begin to flow as unrestrained and unrelenting as the North Pacific Current. Her body shakes with sobs until she feels a warm hand enfolding her entire shoulder.

She looks up. Kai is looking down on her, eyebrows furrowed.

Serena stands and takes a step back, embarrassed to be caught in a moment of weakness. "What are you doing here?" she asks.

"I was sent to watch after you," he says.

Serena wipes her hand across her nose, trying to stifle the hiccups that insist on replacing her sobs.

Kai steps forward. "I thought it was to make sure you didn't make another unauthorized trip to The Dry…"

Arms hanging limp at her sides, Serena looks at him. "You have babysitting duty."

"I volunteered. And it looks like you need some company anyway."

Serena almost laughs out loud. "I need much more than that." *A mother, a new job, more wolfsbane.*

When Kai steps forward once again, the walls of her cave press in until it seems as though his wide shoulders touch each side of the room. She folds her arms across her midsection; the heat is back.

Kai extends a hand, palm open.

Looking up at him, her lips part. "What?" she breathes.

"Let me see."

"Oh," she looks down at her hands and opens them to reveal the charm inside. "It was my mother's."

Kai takes the charm from her, rubbing the rest of the grime away. "Come on," he says, smiling. "I know what we can do with this."

He steps back and Serena finds herself moving toward him like a magnet.

"What?"

"Just trust me," he winks at her.

Serena looks at him. It would be better not to get too close, she needs to concentrate on her job. Serena follows his sure footsteps down the halls. He keeps looking over his shoulder at her.

"It's quiet out here," Kai says, breaking her concentration.

Serena moves up to walk next to him. "No one has occupied these caves for a long time."

"Except you," Kai says. "Why is that?"

Serena pauses for a brief second before taking her next step.

"What?" asks Kai.

"Nothing," says Serena. "It's just that…you are the first person to ever ask me that."

"Well?" Kai prods for the answer.

"Well…" Serena stops walking and crosses her arms, turning to Kai. "Out here, I feel like I am closer to home."

He keeps looking at her, as though he expects further explanation.

"I can show you," Serena says. "That is...if you want to see?"

Kai leans against the wall, rubbing at his chin with one hand as he looks at Serena. Her eyes fall to her feet.

Finally, Kai pushes himself off the wall. "I'm up for anything you want to show me."

"Okay," Serena stammers, tucking strands of her hair behind her ear. "Come on." She leads the way toward the open ocean. Once they reach the

ledge, right where water trickles in for high tide, she turns to Kai. "Ready?"

"Ready for what?" he asks, frowning and peering out into the darkness.

Serena smiles to herself. "To see what is really worth saving—even if it is beyond the borders of our kingdom."

Serena dives, forming fins and heading for the open ocean. Though coral still grows throughout the main paths of the Undine territory, it doesn't thrive and there aren't as many species that choose to dwell there. Undine seldom visit the backside of the mountain, except of course, the King's Guard during their rounds. Here, right outside of Serena's doorstep, the ecosystem is flooded with life displayed in vibrant colors and in varying textures and shapes.

Serena stops by a pile of rocks with a hole the size of her fist in between them. She peers in and sees movement. Smiling, she beckons Kai closer. She picks up a purple, spiny sea urchin and waves it in front of the hole.

A wolf eel appears, its grey lips opening in anticipation of a meal. His needle-like teeth gleam. Kai starts to back away, but Serena shakes her head at him. Serena releases the sea urchin and the wolf eel consumes it in one swallow. Kai touches his stomach, groaning. Serena doesn't blame him, thankful the Undine aren't yet reduced to have to digest such spiky things.

Before the wolf eel can retreat to its cave, Serena scratches it under the chin. It pauses, momentarily cautious, then leans into her touch. The fish runs the length of its sleek body down the back of her palm, then turns for more. For as ferocious as the creature looks, the wolf-eel is gentle and can be docile.

Wondering if the same could be learned from the werewolves, Serena gestures for Kai to hold his hand out. He does so, not taking his eyes off its teeth. The wolf-eel moves closer to Kai, rubbing against a rock. Kai glances at Serena, then back down at the fish. It touches Kai's knuckles, tentatively shrinking back; neither one moves. Finally, the fish caresses Kai's hand with the side of his head.

Kai smiles down, mouth open in awe at the unique animal, then smiles at Serena. She smiles back, but grabs his hand to lead him away. They don't want to overstay their welcome with the temperamental fish.

Serena scans the wall of coral. Kai is sticking closer to her, stopping a moment longer than necessary next to each dark crevice, peering inside.

It is amazing, thinks Serena. *How many times has he passed over these very corals, never stopping to appreciate the life systems they support?* She smiles to herself. *I'll show him something that will put some life into his patrols.*

Farther along the reef, Serena spots what she is looking for—a dark pinkish-red octopus, spread out among the rocks. Serena motions for Kai to hang back while she swims closer, at first putting her back to the creature. He curls up his tentacles so at the end they each look like a spiral shell.

Serena puts one hand behind her, still backing up, until she reaches the octopus. It responds to her touch by reaching out himself. Serena feels the bright white suction cups slide across the palm of her hand. It tickles.

She leans back and allows the octopus to move over her. A school of fish soaring overhead is blocked out by row after row of the suction cups.

The beak between the eight legs on the underside pecks at her cheek, but it does not hurt. Its tentacles squeeze, the white cups sticking to skin and scale alike. It is the tightest hug Serena has ever received.

Suddenly, the octopus jets away, expelling ink as it goes. Serena turns around to find Kai standing there with a large rock raised over his head, trying to come to her rescue. He still doesn't understand—it's not her that needs the rescuing.

Let me try one more time, she thinks. *He has to find the beauty in this place somehow.*

She crawls along the ocean floor in the opposite the direction of the octopus, pushing herself forward with short flicks of her tail. Pausing at the bottom of a steep but short incline, Serena waits for Kai to join her. When he moves up alongside her, his eyebrow is raised in question. A devious smile slides across her face, and she gestures to just over the hill with her head. He glances up, then slowly wriggles forward.

Serena hangs back, watching his face as he displays his true inner guard. A strong but cautious thrust forward puts him at the crest of the hill, body tense and alert, eyes scanning the shallow gully below him. Finally, his gaze fixes on the deepest part of the depression in front of him, where three dozen nurse sharks lay resting after a night of hunting. His

eyes fly open while he stares. Serena laughs, releasing a myriad of bubbles that float up, surrounding Kai.

Jolting away from the bubbles, Kai bats at them as if the bubbles are the threat and not the nest of nurse sharks. Serena is still laughing, having a hard time of not sucking salt water down her throat. When she rises to meet Kai, he glances at the sharks. They are beginning to stir. Panic overtaking him again, he pushes her back down the hill, covering her body with his.

Serena goes still, trying to memorize the sensation of his large body pressing into hers. His tail pins hers to the rocky seafloor, but his hand is behind her head, protecting her from the jagged stones. Soft ripples from the current rock Kai back and forth. Serena conforms to the movement, tentatively placing the palm of her hand on his chest. It swells with each breath he takes, reminding Serena of the rhythmic hum emitted by the hardened, steel engines of passing ships.

She looks up at him, and her shoulders sag. Kai is not reveling in the experience like she is. His eyes dart around as the bubbles clear, and his hands reach for a trident that isn't there.

Serena rolls her eyes, pushing him off. Before he can grab her again, she darts up and over the hill. She pauses, amidst the nest of sleeping sharks, looking over her shoulder to ensure Kai is watching. He shakes his head, from side to side, signaling very clearly to not do what she is about to do.

With a sly smile, Serena reaches for the tail of one of the sharks. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Kai's head shake faster. A few more bubbles escape as she tries to hold back more laughter. In one, quick motion, Serena grabs a grey, sleek fin and pulls.

The shark bolts, rousing the rest of the nest. Serena feels a pair of hands under her arms, jerking her up and away from the sharks.

They crest the surface, surrounded by ocean, spitting saltwater from their lungs to breathe air.

"Why do you do that?" Kai asks.

"Do what?" Serena pushes her hair away from her face, struggling to get the glow under control after the excitement of seeing the pod of sharks.

"Put yourself in danger like that!"

"They were nurse sharks, Kai. Bottom feeders. When have you known them to attack the Undine?"

The smile disappears from her face when he frowns.

"I don't do it for the thrill," Serena explains. "I do it because it's beautiful. They're beautiful."

Kai looks at her, then stares back at the empty surface of the ocean.

"It's our home," she continues. "And it's dying. And no one is doing anything about it. Not the king, not the council, not the King's Guard…" Serena trails off as the second-in-command arches his eyebrow at her.

"There are more pressing matters," he says, lips turned down in a frown. "As one of the Temporal Caste, you should know that better than most."

She huffs, blowing a small strand of hair from her forehead. His reminder that she is the youngest Undine stings, like she is not old enough or experienced enough compared to him. "Soon there will be nothing to feed calflings, even if we had another pairing. Our own apathy has brought our ecosystem beyond a turning point."

The couple bob up and down at the surface, thrust into an awkward silence at the mention of a pairing—the Undine mating ritual. The ocean is so calm tonight, pinpoints of each star reflect on top of the water. The horizon blends with the sky, and for a moment, it seems Serena is weightless, floating in the heavens with Kai.

Serena bites the inside of her cheek, trying to bring herself back to reality. She skims her hand over the water, scattering bits of light along with the illusion.

"Where is your trident anyway?" She looks up at Kai. "You look… naked without it." The sentence came out harsher than she intends.

Kai blinks, then smiles. "My turn to show you something." He pikes his body, then dives under.

Serena shakes her head. *Don't follow him yet, you don't want to look too eager.*

She looks toward the forest, squinting her eyes at a looming cliff. There is movement—a tail, possibly. It disappears into the trees.

"Are you coming?" Kai asks. He has resurfaces and flicks a splash of water toward Serena with his tail. "Or are you just going to search for Ungainlies all night long?"

Serena sighs, wipes her face, and treads toward Kai. "It's not the Ungainlies I'm looking for."

"What then?" Kai is back to a playful mood, a smile on his face.

It's been a long time, but Serena remembers how to play, too. She smiles back, a devious spark in her eyes. "It is something…very dangerous." She says, lowering her voice and moving closer as she speaks. "Something with large red eyes, and long sharp teeth. Its fur stinks of Undine blood and its claws…ARGHH!"

Serena jumps at Kai, hands extended. His eyes go wider than they had at the nurse sharks, and she laughs as she reaches him, dunking him just below the surface. Returning to the surface with a powerful thrust, Kai heaves Serena backward. She splashes into the ocean, sunk under with more water Kai sends her way.

Sputtering and laughing together, the current pushes them into one another.

An ear-piercing howl cuts off their fun. They both turn to the cliffs. Scales along Kai's shoulders, arms, and neck pop out as quickly as the goose bumps on Serena.

"Is that the one you saw?" Kai asks.

Serena cocks her head. "The howl is familiar."

"Really?" asks Kai. "They all sound the same to me."

"I don't know," she says. "Come on, let's go."

She turns, disappearing below the waves. Kai follows a split second later, still armored in scales.

Chapter Sixteen

Serena follows Kai's lead, swimming beside him. They haven't strayed far from the kingdom, and soon they emerge into the caves, walking the corridors just below Vancouver Island. Serena breathes in the smell of wood smoke before she sees it, and knows where they are headed. The armory.

They walk in, greeted by the loud banging of hammer against metal. Ronan, the armorer, barely glances up at their entrance. The rest of the room, as crowded as it is, falls silent. Most of the guard hovers behind Murphy, who stands closest to Ronan, overseeing his work.

As withered and knobby as Ronan's hands are, they maneuver the metal on his workbench with skill and strength. Ronan is mated to the orphanage keeper, Rayne. The couple is as close as a mother and father to Serena than she ever had. Though Ronan always spent long days in the armory, he would often eat dinner with the calflings, saying very little. For that reason, Serena always tried to sit close to him. For the quiet and for the smell of wood smoke.

Serena looks at the fire, contemplating if Armorer Assistant would be a better job than Werewolf Liaison. Ronan's blackened scales represent long days that grew into years and then decades working over the fire. Most of his body is covered, as scales are better protection around the searing heat required for melting metal. Some have experienced so much exposure they are curling up. He looks as spiky as a sea urchin.

But each job inflicts its own scars. Serena looks down at her scratched legs and arms, surveying the gashes left by her most recent trip to The Dry. When she looks back up, she catches Ronan watching her. He grunts, a monotone, disinterested noise. Serena has learned he uses it for many emotions—anger, dissatisfaction, approval, humor.

"I have something for you," Kai says as he steps toward Ronan. Holding out his fist, Kai retracts his scales and peels his fingers open, displaying the charm of her mother's necklace. "Can you incorporate it somehow?"

Ronan looks down at the piece of metal on his workbench.

Serena rises on her tiptoes to try to catch a glance of what is there, but it is obscured by a myriad of tools cluttering the edge of the high table.

"Not here," says Ronan. "The metal is too far set to hold the piece in place." He rises from his seat, slowly. "But…" Ambling over to a series of weapons hanging on the wall, Ronan is slow and walks with a limp.

Serena scans the wall before he gets there. Broken and rusted tridents hang from hooks. Old knives, weakened by their time exposed to water lie in wait for melting into stronger metals. There is one weapon that stands whole and gleaming amidst a boneyard of armaments: a bow and arrow set.

The arrows are splayed out on the wall, the metal of the spearheads so clear Serena can see her own image as she nears. Next to them is a long, thin bag—their case fashioned to the back of an armored breastplate. Serena frowns. The breastplate is short and would cover little more than half a guard's torso.

The bow itself, a thin crescent, looks fragile. Serena approaches and flicks the string looped from one end to another. It is so tight it barely gives. The bow holds it strong, not bending to the pressure. The bottom edge of the bow bears Ronan's mark, a curved wave giving into flame—Ronan Sea-Fire.

Ronan holds the charm up to the center of the breastplate. "I'll have to make some adjustments to ensure it stays, but I think I can do it."

"Wait, that was my mother's!" Serena protests.

Ronan turns to look at Serena and grunts.

"The bow and arrow is for you," Kai says, standing behind Serena's shoulder.

Serena looks from Kai to Ronan.

Murphy crosses his arms. "We'll begin training tomorrow. You aren't to go to The Dry again without knowing how to use a weapon."

"But…" She looks from Murphy to Ronan. "I wouldn't know how to repay you."

Ronan's lips part. Serena thinks it is his version of a smile, but she can't be sure.

"You don't have to repay me. You were always my favorite." He holds the charm up to the fire to inspect the light that shines through.

"Your favorite?" Serena frowns, trying to remember if they've spoken two words together, until now.

Ronan flips the charm up, catching it in a solid grip. He looks at Serena and grunts.

As he walks back to his workbench, Serena tilts her chin down, hiding her smile. Ronan returns to banging away on his workbench. The guards avoid her gaze, wiping smudges from their own weapons.

Serena searches for something to distract from the suddenly awkward atmosphere.

"By the way, thank you for leaving your trident, Kai. It came in handy," she says.

"Did it?" he asks.

"It took some getting used to. Those things are heavy," says Serena. She eyes the group of King's Guard behind him. Some smile at her comment. "But my trip to The Dry would've gone very differently had I not had it with me."

"So you did see one?" Murphy asks. "A werewolf?" He stares, tensing for her answer.

Serena pauses, considering the looks from the men in the room. Usually she can decipher moods, but the King's Guard is a different story.

She nods. Murphy tenses more, if that is even possible.

"One was out there tonight." Kai says, almost under his breath.

All heads turn to look at him.

"Are you certain? It isn’t a full moon tonight." Murphy says.

Kai nods. "I was at the surface myself and we heard the howl." His hand twitches, as if moving for a trident that still isn't there.

"Then how can you be sure the howl, and what you saw…" Murphy says, glancing at Serena. "Wasn't a regular wolf?"

"Same as you can tell the difference between the ocean and the sky, Murphy Air-Spirit," Serena chides him.

Murphy takes a deep breath and looks at Serena. His spine going rigid, and he seems to grow a foot taller and his shoulders a foot wider. Serena stands fast, refusing to cower for whatever rebuke is coming. Belittling the head of the King's Guard in front of his own men is as bad as stepping on the kings toes—if he were actually able to transform them.

The entire room grows silent, except for the crackling fire. Finally, Ronan's hammer resumes its steady banging. Like continual air bubbles floating up from the Earth's crust, diffusing pressure, the hammer beats the

tension out of the room. Murphy's eyes flit to Ronan, and he takes a cue from the older man to move on.

"So they've found a way then," says Murphy. "To take form without the full moon." He shakes his head, looking down at his feet. "If only we could've found a way to birth our young without the full moon, or the beaches."

Behind the workbench, Ronan grunts.

Serena scratches the back of her neck, still eyeing Murphy. Kai pats Murphy's shoulder twice, hard. Murphy seems to have let Serena's remark go. She is just glad he didn't pull out his trident. Her eyes flit from Murphy to Kai, then to Ervin standing behind them. None of the three have their weapons though several others do.

"Where are your tridents?"

Their eyes snap to her, then over to Ronan. Behind her, Serena hears one last clank of the hammer at the workbench. Then a ring of metal on metal, its echo resonating around the room. Serena turns toward the bench.

As she nears, Ronan steps away. She walks around to where Ronan stands. Pushing an overturned bucket closer to the table, she steps up onto it. This side of the table is clear of tools, and the object Ronan has crafted comes into view.

A new trident, freshly sharpened and gleaming under the light of the fire, sits on the table. Serena has not seen this one before. The three tips do not contain the barb extending backward from the point. It will be easier to remove the trident from trees—or from anything—this way. The curve on the outer two prongs is deeper, and the center prong is the longest of the trio. Instead of a smooth single pole as the stem, the trident twists, convenient for a sure hold. It separates into two spiraling rods, which merge back together at the bottom.

The trident is almost the same height as her, by far the smallest of its kind to have ever existed. This trident is for Serena.

Her breath steals away, as sharply as when she fell from the tree. She recognizes the coloring. The gold of the King's Guard is mixed with magnesium alloy, a rare metal extracted straight from seawater that takes a lifetime to collect. The material is lighter than aluminum itself and is solely used to render tridents for the King's Guard.

At the stem of the weapon is a mark. It isn't Ronan's, though by all rights the sea-fire mark should be there. Instead, there is a double circle;

the shape above smooth and whole, the shape below choppy. A full moon and its shadow falling upon the ocean. Moon-Shadow.

Her breath comes back, accompanied by a lump in her throat. Aside from the dolls she received from Rayne every year on her birthday, all of which had almost always been destroyed within a week by the other orphans, this is the first real gift anyone has given her. And never has she received anything so beautiful, so meaningful, and so…personal.

She reaches out, tentatively, toward the Moon-Shadow etching, her heart thudding in her chest.

"Don't touch it. Not yet." Ronan stops her hand with his own. "The metal will need to set overnight." He pats her hand. His fingers feel rough and leathery, but warm.

Serena turns her hand and grasps, pulling Ronan into a full hug, for which she receives only a grunt in response. Her body shakes as she struggles to keep silent sobs from surfacing. She keeps her face buried in Ronan's shoulder, hidden from the King's Guard. She feels Ronan's hand move to the back of her head and stroke her hair.

"You'll be just fine calfling. Just fine…" Ronan says under his breath. Though Rayne used the term of endearment for all the children in her care, never once has Serena heard Ronan use it before.

Serena takes a deep breath and steps away. Ronan smiles down at her, then turns back to his bench, cleaning his tools for the night.

As the heat in her cheeks ebb and the lump in her throat subsides, she turns to face the rest of the men. The few that were sitting stand up, and the rest turn toward her. They are large with sinewy muscle, wide shoulders, and powerful legs. They are a dream for many Undine maidens, the true fantasy of a paired partner. But Serena doesn't see that now. She sees brothers, a family she never knew she had.

And three of the elite warriors of the Undine kingdom have just watched their revered tridents be melted down and combined into a weapon for her.

"It took three of them to make mine?" she asks, looking from Ervin to Murphy.

"There was some trial and error," Murphy says.

Behind Serena, Ronan clears his throat.

"We needed it to be perfect," explains Murphy, covering for Ronan.

Her gaze falls on Kai. Ervin is Serena's best friend, and Murphy would be expected to give his weapon before he asks any other, but what motivation does Kai have?

"They were all given willingly, Serena—and for good reason. We do not see the sacrifice as a loss," Kai says. "The Werewolf Liaison is ultimately charged with saving our race, and we will do anything we can to help you, if it is you that must be out there."

Serena's chest wells with the mixed emotions of guilt, gratitude, sorrow, and pride.

One of the many guards standing behind him clutches his own trident tighter. "We tried offering ours, so the Head of the Guard, The Second, and our youngest member don't have to be—"

"And I said we will not hear of it again," Murphy turns to bark at the guard.

"As you say," the guard mumbles, dipping his head.

She smiles, stepping toward Murphy. He breathes out, and his shoulders lower as he watches Serena come closer. He holds up one hand, stopping her in her tracks and declining the hug Ronan endured. Instead, he takes his hand and lays it across Serena's shoulder, diagonal to him. This is the warrior's salute, performed before each changing of the guard when one is relieved of duty and the other assumes command.

Serena returns the salute, extending her own hand toward his shoulder. It falls short, laying to rest on his bicep. Murphy's large hand covering her entire shoulder and draping down the side is a sharp contrast to her thin wrist and wiry fingers that lay across his massive arm. They both look down. Serena laughs and Murphy cracks a smile.

Finally, Murphy pats her shoulder. "You need to get some rest for tomorrow. Ervin will take you home."

Serena nods, releasing her salute. She turns, finding herself face to face with Kai.

He doesn't give her a salute. Instead, he nods his head, that playful smile still on his face. "Thanks for showing me what is worth saving," he says.

She returns the smile. "And me," she says.

Ervin takes Serena by the arm, leading her out of the armory. A quick glance back before she turns the corner reveals Murphy and the rest of the

King's Guard behind him, staring at the fires, mouths tight and grim. Kai is still watching her.

Guilt that her mind is on Kai when she should be showing more gratitude over the sacrificed weapons, overcomes Serena and she leans into Ervin. When she finally looks up, she realizes they are headed in the opposite direction of Serena's cave.

She looks at Ervin. "Home?" she asks.

They turn down the corridor that used to be filled with the chatter of a dozen Undine orphans. Now it is ghostly silent.

Ervin nods. "Home."

Chapter Seventeen

Awakening to the swish-swish-swish of a broom on floor, Serena cracks her eyes open to find Cordelia stealing glances over her shoulder as she works. Serena does not move. Instead, she surveys the otherwise empty room. It still holds cribs, toys, and swaddling blankets—objects that have been waiting for almost seventeen years to be used by a newborn Undine.

Next to the cleaning supplies is a bin of dolls. Cordelia works her way toward it, sweeping as she goes. When she pauses, Serena closes her eyes quickly, feigning sleep.

"Serena?" Cordelia whispers.

Serena doesn't answer.

Satisfied she has privacy, Cordelia picks up a baby Undine doll. She wraps the shiny pink tail in a swaddling blanket and paces back and forth across the room while she rocks the doll in her arms as steady and as soothing as a gentle summer tide.

Cordelia opens her mouth, and begins to sing to the doll. The tune is barely audible but Serena recognizes the rhythm, and the words come to her:

Hush little calfling, don’t say a word,
the sting is short when scales are conjured.

Soon you will be swimming in the seas,
among Undine and anemones.

It is a tune stolen from the Ungainly song *Mockingbird*, modified to fit Society. Serena wonders which ancestor overheard the song, and if they were ever punished for absconding.

Cordelia kisses the doll on the nose and continues singing:

When you come of age your hair will shine,
No longer will you be a calfling o' mine

Grow your legs to walk ashore one day,
find a mate to take where the moon holds sway.

Cordelia pauses, swallows, and lowers her voice even further:

Even if no newborns can be found,
you'll still be the sweetest calfling in town.

Cordelia continues to rock the doll for a minute more. When she hears footsteps down the hallway, she returns the doll to the bin and the blanket to the folded pile. She leaves the room, and Serena hears a hushed conversation float in from the corridor.

Turning over in her cot, Serena's chest feels more hollow than ever. She isn't allowed to wallow in her species' misery for long. A few minutes later Rayne walks in, humming a brighter tune.

"Serenita…" she croons. "Time to wake uuuup."

Serena smiles, rubbing a palm down her face. She turns and mumbles, voice still heavy with sleep, "Morning, Mother Rayne."

"Oh, don't Mother Rayne me. Get out of bed, sleepy head." Rayne pulls the sheet off Serena with one swift motion. "You are far too old for cots and blankets."

Serena stands slowly, stretching out her back. "I don't remember them being so uncomfortable and itchy." Even still, the familiar smells and nostalgia of her childhood home helped her sleep.

"Well you are welcome to sleep here anytime," Rayne says, gathering up all the bedding for washing. "But next time try the nanny's cove."

Serena glances at the small nook carved out in the wall for the nighttime nanny, about the same size as the sleeping cove in her own cave.

"I'd forgotten about that." She looks around the room, empty save for her and Rayne. "Not that I am ungrateful, but why did Ervin bring me here?"

Rayne smiles. "Because I asked him to. You've been through enough and I thought it might help to check in at home."

Home. A small flower of warmth blooms in Serena's belly at the word.

"They've already summoned you to the Great Hall today," Rayne continues, a frown tugging at the corners of her lips.

Almost immediately the flower inside Serena shrivels.

"But first—food. Breakfast is ready, and growing cold." Rayne shuffles Serena out of the room and into the dining area next to the kitchen.

There is a long, rectangular table with benches running down the sides. Old stains spot the worn wood, and the table is pockmarked with divots and cracks, scarred from years and years serving calflings.

Bowls of food sit at one end. There is dried and shredded red seaweed, a giant bowl of noodled kelp, and nori, roasted in small sheets. A wide variety of fish and crustaceans, some raw and some freshly cooked over dried driftwood fires, are spread across the table.

It is a feast, and not just by orphan standards. The last time Serena can remember Rayne making this much food was just before a final exam. It reminds Serena what she has to look forward to today—*another punishment?* Serena slumps into her seat, her appetite gone.

But Rayne is standing over her, piling different colored sea vegetables on Serena's plate. Sliding the full plate in front of Serena, Rayne sits down across from her, then pushes a bowl of filleted salmon toward Serena. Serena crinkles her nose and shakes her head.

"You always were a picky eater." Rayne sighs. "You can't keep up your strength eating plants all day long."

"My diet contains plenty of nutrients," says Serena, her voice sour as she pushes away the salmon with her fork. Sea vegetables spend their entire lives luxuriating in the world’s largest, oldest, most complete mineral bath. They soak it up and are among the richest sources of calcium, iron, zinc, and potassium, as well as fifty-three other minerals.

"Your diet has given me cause for concern over the years. Not to mention having to make sure there was something on the table you actually would eat," Rayne said, waving her hands as she talked. She always had a way of making up for Ronan's silence. "As if procuring enough food for twenty Undine at once wasn’t enough."

Rayne pauses, glancing down the long, empty table. Serena remembered the chaos of mealtime. As every caste before Serena entered The Choosing, the table became less and less crowded and mealtime grew more and more quiet.

"Spent all my time in the kitchen, I did," says Rayne. It is almost a whisper as she stares at her open hands, idle with the lack of orphans.

Serena picks up her fork, digging into the seaweed. "I miss your cooking," she says, swallowing her first bite and going for more. "Now I

mostly eat as I swim, picking at raw plants. There is something to be said for a warm meal." Driftwood is not easy to come by and it takes forever to dry out enough for a fire in the damp caves.

Rayne brightens with a smile. Her hands brush the table, as if they've suddenly found use.

"What's this?" Serena asks, poking at a pile of deep-green plants. "Something new?"

"Wakame. I seasoned it with salt."

Serena tries it, letting the flavors roll around in her mouth. Her eyebrows lift. "It’s good."

"Thank you," says Rayne.

"No—I mean really, really good." Serena takes another bite, talking through a full mouth. "Good enough for any Undine." Serena pauses, arching one eyebrow at Rayne. "Good enough for a king."

Color creeps up Rayne's cheeks and her scales flare a deep green. "Oh, I don't think the king—"

"Trust me," Serena mumbles. "There is a lot we don't know about the king."

Rayne looks at Serena, patting her on the shoulder. "You'll be just fine."

Serena puts her fork down. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Maybe," Rayne stands with new vigor, "because there is some truth to it, Serenita." She winks.

Serena grunts, sounding an awful lot like Ronan, even to herself.

"Morning, Cordelia," Rayne sings out to the new occupant of the dining room. "Want some breakfast?"

"I already ate," Cordelia says in a flat tone, glancing at Serena.

"Well, then." Rayne nods once. "If you're done with the sweeping, I suppose that's all I need for today."

The room grows silent except for the sound of Serena's fork pushing food around her plate. She can feel Cordelia staring. An itch grows on her back between her shoulder blades.

Rayne clears her throat. "Don't you have Assembly to attend today, anyhow?"

"As you say," says Cordelia.

Serena can hear her old caste mate turn and leave the room.

"As do you," Rayne says, glancing at Serena. "As do we all. If you get nervous, just look for me in the crowd. And think of…of…"

"I'll think of your wakame," Serena says. "In fact, maybe we all will. Let's pack up the leftovers."

Chapter Eighteen

"Go!" Serena pushes Rayne into the room, then steps back, hiding from the crowd.

From the quick glimpse, Serena knows most, if not all, of Society is here. There is barely room to stand in the large cavern.

"Excuse me—coming through. Can I just squeeze by?"

Rayne make her way through the crowd, bundled food in hand. The low murmur of voices grow silent and Serena risks another glance around the corner.

Rayne has only made it halfway to the front when the king's voice booms through the cavern. "What's this?"

Rayne actually takes a step back. Serena knows the feeling, but she silently wills Rayne forward. Rayne obliges, closing the distance to the throne with a hesitant stride. "Food, your majesty. For the court."

The king, and Nerin by his side, glance at each other.

"Very well," he nods, waving it toward a table on the side by the members of the council.

Rayne bobs her head, then bustles to the table.

Standing on her tiptoes, Serena's eyes come on the objects sitting on the table. They are the experiments from her cave, still sitting in crab traps and jars. Next to them is her dry box. Together, they represent every last personal object she owns, except her necklace. Serena's hand goes to the base of her neck where the jewel hung until she remembers she left it with Ronan to be incorporated into her armor.

Only a small corner of the table is uncluttered, and it isn't large enough for Rayne's food. Stacks of books, as well as Serena's personal belongings, are squeezed on the flat surface. Rayne sets the package of food on the floor, then brings her hands to the sea urchin jar, one of Serena's experiments.

"Don't touch the evidence," Zayla speaks up from behind the table. She uses her Caste-Master voice, shrill and clipped.

Heat creeps up Serena's neck and her fists clench. *That was uncalled for.* But before Serena can speak, Kai comes around the table.

"Let me," he says, laying a hand on Rayne's shoulder. Her hair has begun to glow.

He picks up the jar of sea urchins, thrusting it at Zayla. "Here, find a place for this."

She takes the jar, mouth open. She wouldn't dare challenge him, her position well below his. Still, it doesn't do for members of the council to appear divided, whether it is over sea urchins or not. They always present themselves in unity in front of Society, which is why every one of them pronounced Serena guilty. Except of course for Kai's wish to abstain.

Serena smiles when the glow leaves Rayne's locks just as Zayla's light up. Zayla leaves to set the jar on the other end of the table, forced to pile books higher for more room. A stack of them fall, toppling off the table. The noise of the accident echoes around the room and Serena overhears snickers.

Mariam bustles forward from the crowd. "Oh, good grief," she exclaims. She shoos Zayla away and picks up each book herself, inspecting them for damage as if they were her own children.

Rayne and Kai finish squeezing in each of Rayne's dishes, nudging Zayla clear of the table. With her cheeks thoroughly flushed, Zayla glares at the plate of noodled kelp.

Kai lays a reassuring hand on Rayne's shoulder. "Thank you."

Serena touches her fingertips to her lips. Kai's small actions toward Rayne mean more to Serena than a thousand golden tridents.

When Serena looks back at the throne, both the king and Nerin are staring at her.

"Serena Moon-Shadow." A voice calls out. It is Nerin's, not the king’s. "You may now approach."

Serena licks her lips, trying to slow her breathing back to normal. She looks down and makes small adjustments to her scales, bringing enough out so as to be deemed appropriate for court.

Smoothing her hair, Serena glances at the end of the tresses to ensure she has her glow under control. When she walks forward, all faces are turned her way. The small path Rayne forged grows wider as Serena approaches. She tries not to concentrate on the faces, afraid of what they may exhibit. Disdain, pity, fear—each person unknowingly dousing Serena with their own form of punishment.

Instead, Serena focuses on the king's long tail, draped over the throne and extending down the steps leading up to his platform. It feels uncomfortable to stare, but it helps remind Serena even the king is not without his imperfections. Knowing this, she is able to hold her chin a little higher.

The king's flippers twitch, as if they know they're under scrutiny. Serena breaks her eyes away to survey the council, now that she is close enough. They stand as one in a line behind the table of her belongings and Rayne's food. As unified as they may appear, Serena spots a subtle difference in their attitudes.

Murphy and Kai stand tall and proud, eyes scanning the crowd. Serena catches the twitch of Murphy's right hand, the one that usually holds the trident.

Evandre, along with Sarafina, the Head Gardener, have their heads bent together, whispering and pointing to the jar of Serena's algae.

Zayla leans away from the rest of them all, arms crossed. Rayne and Mariam leave the platform together, taking their position in the front row. As Serena emerges from the crowd, she glances at them. Mariam pushes her shoulders back, encouraging Serena to do the same. Rayne winks and gives Serena a small smile. *Be brave, and we are here for you.* The messages her mentor and mother send are perfectly clear. Their colors, paired together, suddenly strike Serena as odd. Deep brown and dark green —the colors of the forest.

Serena steps up to the mid-platform, clasping her hands behind her back. She holds her breath and waits for the king to speak.

"Shall we begin?" he asks, his voice low.

Serena can imagine all of Society behind her leaning in to hear his words. "Yes, your majesty." She risks a glance behind her at Mariam and Rayne. They both shoo at her with their hands, urging her to turn back around and pay attention.

"Isadora," the king calls.

Scales glittering like black gold, the Undine psychic approaches the king to stand next to Serena. Rumor is that he has avoided her as much as possible since his wife's death. She is no doubt a painful reminder.

A few inches taller, Isadora moves so close to Serena that they brush shoulders. The psychic gives a slight nod, acknowledging Serena. Unable

to return the gesture, Serena stares with wide eyes. Suddenly the audience watching her back isn't nearly so unsettling as the one maiden by her side.

"You have decided on your punishment?" the king asks.

"I have, your majesty." Isadora responds.

The king leans forward, placing his elbows on the armrests and his chin in his hands.

Forcing her eyes from Isadora, Serena doesn't wish to see her expression as she announces the next punishment.

At least we are getting through them quickly instead of dragging it out for a year.

"At first, I had a lot of trouble deciding on an appropriate punishment, one that would serve justice as well as benefit Society."

The only part of Isadora Serena can see out of the corner of her eye is her long, thin nose.

"Her past is very clouded," says Isadora. "Which doesn't lend to a clear future in my premonitions."

Serena shifts from one foot to another. *Grace Poseidon, just announce the punishment already. Even the king didn't draw it out this much. Werewolf Liaison. Boom. Done.*

"Which is why I had all of Serena's things brought to the Great Hall. Personal possessions can be as revealing as a maiden's dreams." Isadora pauses, taking a long moment to look at Serena.

Leaning back in his throne, the king begins tapping two fingers on the armrest.

Taking her cue, Isadora continues. "As you can see," she says, walking toward the table crowded with Serena's things and Rayne's food. "Much of Serena's possessions come from The Dry. In fact, I hardly see anything made right here in our own kingdom."

Serena's heartbeat flutters. She turns to watch Isadora and most of the Undine maidens in the audience come into view. There are plenty of narrowed eyes and arms crossed. Her hand goes to her flipping stomach. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pictures Liam in werewolf form. His long snout with the half-moon mark takes the place of pursed lips, and it is somehow better.

Isadora moves around the table of evidence, approaching one of Serena's jarred sea urchins. She reaches around to the back of the jar and tugs on something. It won't come loose. Tugging again, Isadora shakes the

entire jar. Serena can see her sea urchins bouncing around, jostled off their rocks.

She tenses, ready to step forward. In front of her, Nerin clears her throat, then shakes her head.

Finally, an audible pop and the shaking stops. Isadora turns, and she holds in front of her a shiny, silver CO_2 bottle like a prized jewel. It stands out against her black scales. The hose still dangles from an opening.

"A prime example," she declares, thrusting the bottle into the air. The maidens closest to her lean back. She walks the length of the mid-platform, making sure all can see. When she reaches the end, she turns a knob on the bottle, releasing the contents at full throttle. She walks it in front of Assembly again, this time with CO_2 spewing out of the hose. A wave of Undine lean away as it oscillates down the crowd.

The hose makes a shrill whistle, and draws circles in the air. Isadora turns to Serena.

"You just wasted my last CO_2 canister," Serena says before Isadora has a chance to speak. "It is an Ungainly apparatus, extremely hard to come by." If the truth of the full extent of her absconding will come out, Serena will speak it first.

Isadora opens and closes her mouth, at a loss for words. The canister's whistle sputters out, the hose hanging limp with the last of the air gone. Isadora licks her lips. "So you do not deny it?"

"What?" Serena asks.

"That this was in your possession, taken from the Ungainly?"

"I very well can't deny it now, having just stated it." Serena points out the obvious, tapping her foot in time to the king's own tapping on his armrest.

A quick glow runs down the inside of the Isadora's hairline. "Then how, exactly, did you come by it?" she asks.

The event is so clear in Serena's mind, it would be difficult to fabricate a lie. Holding back her shoulders, Serena turns to the king and answers. "I entered an Ungainly camp at night, stealing four of those canisters. They were strapped to those wheeled contraptions Ungainlies sometimes pedal through the paths of the forest. No one saw me."

"And the purpose?" asks Isadora, replacing the canister back on the table.

Serena is still addressing the king. At least in this direction, she doesn't need to imagine dozens of werewolf snouts. "I need the canisters to emulate rising acidity levels in the ocean." She glances at the table of her experiments, the results speaking for themselves. "My control groups thrive with life while the CO_2 groups are in obvious decline, if not all together dead. If I may, your majesty, this is the problem Society needs to focus on, not my punishments."

"You may not," The king leans forward in his throne. "We are here to administer the second of your punishments, not to solve the acidity problems in our ocean."

Isadora takes her place by Serena's side again. "Serena Moon-Shadow has undoubtedly made unauthorized visits to The Dry," she says. "As she just stated herself, she is stealthy enough to sneak into Ungainly camps and return with their instruments without getting caught."

Serena narrows her eyes. *Where is she going with this?*

"If the king pleases, for Serena's second punishment, I task her with observing the werewolf camp and reporting her findings."

Serena's gasp echoes with that of the crowd behind her.

Chapter Nineteen

"Surely she is capable," Isadora speaks over the protests of the crowd. "After all, I'm not asking her to sneak in and steal something."

Unable to speak, Serena's hand goes to her fluttering stomach. Underneath the fear that courses through her body at the prospect of approaching the entire wolf clan's camp, Serena has to admit there is a small twinge of excitement.

"They'll smell her from a mile away!"

Serena isn't sure but she thinks it is Mariam's voice shouting out from the crowd.

The king still hasn't spoken and in his silence, Isadora feels the need to continue to justify the punishment. "It seems a fitting duty as an extension of her assignment as Werewolf Liaison. She can bring back valuable intelligence—information we can use to solve the problems of our kingdom."

The king's eyes flit away from Isadora, who continues to ramble, and come to rest on Serena.

Noises from the crowd along with Isadora's speech blend together and become a dull roar in the background while the king's bright blue eyes come into sharp focus. The corner of his mouth twitches, pulling at the long white beard that hangs from his chin.

Serena gives the slightest of nods. *I can do this.*

"Very well," says the king. "The second punishment has been assigned."

The Great Hall goes quiet—the decision is made.

"But our Werewolf Liaison will not go on the mission without some basic knowledge on how to defend herself," he says.

Murphy and Kai step forward from the line of the King's Guard at the same time, almost as if it was rehearsed. Serena turns to leave with them, still stunned—and not for the first time—at the decisions coming from the Great Hall. She is stopped short with a cold hand on her arm.

"Look for the one called Alaric," hisses Isadora. "I must know about him. Every detail."

Jerking her elbow from the council member's grasp, Serena returns a harsh gaze and doesn't answer. She is sure Isadora has her own reasons for this particular punishment, but Serena can't decide what they are.

Once in the corridor, Murphy motions to Kai who hands Serena her bow and arrow set, complete with breastplate armor. She runs the pad of her thumb over the her mother's charm, now inlaid into the center of the chest. She smiles up at Kai, but he is already following Murphy down the hall.

Serena trots to catch up, struggling to put on her new armor while she moves. The King's Guard walk so fast. Arms through, arrow carrying case adjusted on her back, straps cinched in on the sides. Just as she finishes with the last strap, Murphy and Kai dive into the receding tide. Their legs transform into fins before they even hit water.

Serena pauses for a moment, astonished. She has always prided herself on how often she transforms, and how little pain it causes compared to others. It didn't ever occur to her to practice with speed. Though, in The Dry, it would absolutely come in handy.

She trudges into the water, her entrance clumsy compared to those before her. Calling forth her own natural body armor, her scales bump against the inside of her breastplate. It moves and shifts, then settles over a new type of skin.

In the water the bow, the arrows, and the rest of the contraption create a drag Serena is not used to. Serena follows the wake of the guards in front of her, their fins almost already out of view. She looks down, trying to adjust straps as she swims. She should have had all the scales out before she put on the armor.

When Serena looks up, Murphy and Kai are gone, and so is their wake. She opens her throat and pushes out whistles and clicks, then waits for the echo. Sound comes back to her, clarifying and expanding her vision farther than her eyes allow. She turns, completing a full circle. When she stops, Murphy is there treading water. She almost does a double-take. Kai is behind him, keeping his distance.

Murphy raises a questioning eyebrow at Serena. Then he sends out his own signal. It is loud and obnoxious, pushing her back several feet in the water.

Her vision goes wonky and she has to shake her head to rid herself of the sound. When it clears, Murphy is still there, looking at her. He buzzes again.

She tries holding up her hands, warding off the sound, to no effect. Serena is pushed back even farther. The noise is jarring and she can feel her hair begin to glow in anger.

She swims back to her original spot, letting out her own signal again. *Back off.*

The Head of the Guard cocks his head, almost as if he is studying her beacon. Then he listens to the echo that comes back to them. He turns to look over his shoulder at Kai who glances at his leader, then back to Serena. Serena doesn't understand the exchange at all.

When he turns back around, Murphy reaches out to her. As an instinct, Serena swats away his hand.

His eyes open in surprise and his mouth tips up in a smile. He points to one of her buckles that has come undone.

Serena lifts her arm, realizing he is only trying to help. His buzzing still has her on edge. She nods, allowing him to make adjustments. He moves to her side, redoing the straps and cinching them tighter. Serena's body jerks with each tug.

Now behind her, Murphy twists the arrow case. She hadn't realized it did that. The opening now faces her fins, but the arrows are strapped so they do not fall out. The pointed bottom of the case sits close to the base of her neck, and each side follows the curve of her back.

Murphy moves in front of Serena again and turns the bow in her hand so the lower limb lies against her arm. He flashes a smile and swims away. Serena follows, keeping her distance. She still expects him to turn and buzz any second. She'll do anything he wants so long as he doesn't do that again.

Ahead, Serena has to move to the side to avoid a clump of jellyfish. She realizes her arrow case and armor no longer create drag. In fact, she barely notices she has them. She speeds up, moving from side to side, then up and down, imitating waves. Still no drag. Ronan's invention is brilliant.

Murphy and Kai are almost gone again, but by now, Serena recognizes exactly where they are headed. The archives.

She angles down, then speeds up to enter the tight passageway. Fizzy bubbles from Murphy’s and Kai’s trails emerge from the tunnel. The usual routine follows. *Fins streamline, scales and hair slick back.* The undercurrent helps her gain speed.

Right shoulder up and back. Serena's arrow case bumps against the tunnel wall. She frowns. She hasn't bumped these walls since she was a calfling. She ducks her head. The tip of the backward arrow case nicks the ceiling. Serena can feel the buckles strain at the change in pressure.

Slowing down for the curve ahead, Serena compensates for the extra bulge at her back. Her breastplate scratches against the wall. She gasps, placing a hand over her mother's charm to protect it. In return, her knuckles scrape against rock.

She picks up speed in the last section, counting on brute force to get her through, unscathed or not. Twisting to conform as best as she can to the crooked tunnel, Serena scrapes against the wall again and feels a buckle come undone. She holds the entire contraption in place, swimming even faster. It feels like she is learning the tunnel all over again.

She is going so fast that when she breaches the surface of the archives entrance pool she comes completely out of the water, adapting from fins to feet and landing steady on the rocky ledge.

Murphy and Kai, already wearing their robes, turn in surprise. Serena refuses to look at them, keeping her chin high and her gaze well away from their ankles.

"Have you always been able to transform that fast?" asks Kai.

Serena reaches the robes hanging on the hooks. She removes her arrows and armor, setting them and the bow on the ground. She glances at Kai. "I learned from the best."

Just a few minutes ago, in fact.

She puts on a robe and picks up her weapons. "Shall we?"

Murphy nods, and Serena leads the way into the archives. Serena sets her weapons down on a table, which is still littered with werewolf books.

"What was that all about?" She turns to Murphy, arms crossed.

"What?" he asks.

"That…that…buzzing!" She almost shivers at the memory.

"Effective, isn't it?" He smiles. "And necessary. Something has to keep the King's Guard in line." He moves into the archives at a slow pace, craning his neck to follow the books straight up the ceiling of the large cavern. "You also have a very distinct call. Almost like…" Murphy trails off.

"Almost like what?" asks Serena.

"It's hard to describe." Murphy glances at Kai, who is quick to jump in.

"You know how the moon holds sway over the ocean, and to an extent, us? Its call isn't as strong as the ocean, but no one can deny it is there," he says.

Serena nods.

"Well, your call is like that."

"My call is like the moon?" Serena doesn't get it, but a flickering memory of the maiden girl led away for punishment because she couldn't resist Serena's call over the king’s crosses her mind.

"Something like that," Murphy is looking at Kai, eyebrows knitted together. "Never mind," he says. "Let's get started."

He motions to several training tridents leaning against the wall. They are simple in design, and obviously well-used by the guard. "We'll start with the bow and arrow, then move on to tridents."

Serena follows him to the center of the archives. "Why in here? Why not practice in The Dry? Or in one of your training rooms?"

Murphy reaches behind Serena to turn her arrow pouch back over, clicking it into place. He removes an arrow, studying its bend.

"We don't want to practice in The Dry and give your enemies a chance to watch. Your abilities should be a surprise to them. And the King's Guard training room is for the King's Guard," he says, crossing his arms.

"Oh." She shifts the armor on her front, as though it will protect her from the sting of his comment.

"Besides." His thumb traces the sharp edges at the tip of the arrow. "What better place to perfect your aim, than in your beloved archives?"

"Oh," Serena says again, louder and more drawn out this time. Her eyes wander up the shelves as she turns in a full circle, imagining all her stray arrows sticking out of ancient books.

Mariam would be so upset.

Chapter Twenty

When Serena, Murphy, and Kai return to corridors of Society, it is nearly empty. Serena is beaming—the archery training was successful. Not that she hit any of her marks, but in that she avoided all the books.

The trident training was much more difficult. Her wrist is sore from the numerous amount of times Kai made her catch the three-pronged spear and rotate the full weight of it around until it comes to rest, straight up and down at her side. She doubted many werewolves would be throwing tridents at her in The Dry, but didn't say as much. She was working to impress Kai more than anything else.

After Murphy excuses himself, Kai turns to Serena. "Shall I escort you home?" he asks.

"To the orphanage," she answers. With all her things still on display in the Great Hall, her cave will be more barren and uninviting than ever.

"As you say," he winks, slipping his hand under the crook of her elbow.

She looks down, heat crawling up her cheeks.

"What?" he asks.

"Nothing," she glances at him. "It just feels like we are on our way to a formal dance."

"Well if we were, you'd be the belle of the ball, for sure."

"I don't think so," says Serena. "I'm no good on my short-webbed toes." She brushes them across the rough cave floor as they walk.

"Just for the record," he squeezes her arm. "I like your webbing. It's not long, almost extending to the end of your toes like Isadora's, or that old oyster gardener that likes following me around."

"That's an age thing," Serena says.

"What?" Kai frowns.

"The older generations have longer webbing while the middle-aged maidens have webbing that extends only to the second knuckle. Then there are the maidens my age—we all have shorter webbing, it is barely even there." Serena stops for a second, willing herself to shut-up. It's as if she is encouraging Kai to check out other maidens—or at least their feet. "I suppose if you took exact measurements, you'd find the Temporal Caste breaks all sorts of records when it comes to webbing length."

"And why do you suppose this is?" asks Kai.

Serena pauses in the corridor, waiting for a pair of maidens to pass. She can't help but notice Kai does not even glance at their feet. After they are well out of earshot, she looks up at Kai. "It is because the Undine are evolving. Nature is preparing us for life in The Dry."

Never having spoken those words aloud before, not even to Mariam or Rayne, Serena holds her breath waiting for Kai's response.

"Don't mention that to the old crones," he smiles. "Can you imagine their response?" His voice goes up a notch, imitating that of an elderly maiden. "These are my grandmother's grandmother's hands. They have not changed. Evolution? Not for the Undine."

Serena laughs. By the time it dies out, they are alone in the corridor.

"So…this is what you do in your spare time," Kai raises an eyebrow at Serena. "Have you discussed your theories with anyone?"

"I sort of tried to tonight, with the king. But he has other things on his mind."

"You're not lying about that," Kai says, taking her hand.

Serena allows it, and they hold hands the rest of the walk. It feels like guppies are fluttering around in her stomach, and she prays to Poseidon that she doesn't trip and fall. When they turn the corner, sounds from the orphanage assault them. It is loud, and not just the calfling kind of loud—things breaking, squawks and cries, fighting. These rooms haven't emitted those sounds in years. This time there are pots and pans clinking, teapots whistling, Rayne shouting orders, and others responding.

Serena and Kai slow their pace. Neither want any part of those sounds. Serena squeezes Kai's hands.

"Get another pot boiling!" Rayne's voice rings out from the kitchen.

Serena and Kai stand back from the door, leaning only slightly to look in. They don't want to attract any more attention than they must.

Zayla, one of three helpers there, is rooting through the cupboards. "There are no more."

"Well, we can't let the skies fall because of that." Rayne has her hand on her hip, sauce dripping from a spoon in her other hand. "Fetch a dirty one from the sink."

Zayla shrugs, retrieving a pot, pockmarked with dried stains from the previous sauce.

"You'll have to wash it, of course," shoots Rayne over her shoulder.

Zayla freezes at the jab, shoulders tight and bunched up around her neck. But she picks up the soap from the counter.

"Assembly is over?" Rayne turns her attention to Kai and Serena.

Kai nods and Serena shifts on her feet. She realizes they are still holding hands and she blushes, unlacing their fingers from each other so she can cross her arms over her mid-section.

"Good," says Rayne. "You can help with the food for Assembly tomorrow."

Kai doesn't hesitate, taking three long strides toward Rayne and bowing before her. "I must return to my rounds, but I thank you for your sustenance today at Assembly. It was delicious."

After Rayne accepts his thanks, Kai turns on his heel and walks out. As he passes Serena, he whispers. "I won't be far."

"What about you? You gonna find some excuse to skip out?" Rayne flicks her spoon at Serena.

Serena licks her lips, glancing around the room. Four other faces tell her she'd better not, which is exactly why she does. "Sleep," she announces.

Rayne smiles. "Well—can't argue with that, can we now? A girl needs her sleep."

Serena nods once in appreciation, and keeps her eyes down. She doesn't need to see the angry faces of the rest—the goose bumps down her back give her an accurate image.

The noises in the kitchen resume under Rayne's steady guidance and Serena smiles. After several years of an empty orphanage, it finally has purpose again making food for Assembly. With Rayne at the helm, everything will fall into place just right.

Serena returns to the newborn room, this time ignoring the itchy cot and blankets, and hops up to the nanny crook. She curls into the hard rock of the foreign sleeping cove, wishing she had her hammer and chisel to work while she settled her mind. But, much like herself, they are hostages of the king and council. At least her mother's charm was spared, tucked safely away in a bodice of armor, held by Murphy for now.

Serena tosses and turns, counting out at least one hundred breakers in her head. Sleep doesn't come. Her mind is on her upcoming punishment—the visit to the werewolf camp. Serena hops down from the nook.

Tiptoeing down the hall, Serena sneaks past the noisy kitchen and out the front entrance. She runs directly into Kai.

"Oomph!" he says as they both bounce back from each other.

"You again?" Her tone is sharper than Serena intended. She takes a deep breath, looking at Kai. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just—don't you ever sleep?"

"Don't you?"

Serena looks back to make sure no one sees them, then she kicks at the rocks by her feet. Kai has a point. "I just want to get my punishment over with."

"The king said you weren't to go until you've had training," Kai crosses his arms.

"Right," says Serena. "I believe the training we've had so far is sufficient enough to return to The Dry." *And I need to get out of here. Please understand,* she thinks. *I need someone to understand.*

Kai's face softens. His lips part, just slightly, and he scratches the back of his neck.

"Wait here," says Kai. "I have to get permission from the king, and… something else."

"What?"

"Your armor." He looks at Serena. "Just, wait. Promise?"

"Promise," says Serena, huffing. He'd better be quick, before Rayne finds her out here and puts her to work in the kitchen.

Kai disappears around the corner. Serena keeps an ear out for Mother Rayne.

"Psst, Serena—come on!" Kai beckons her to join him. He hands her the bow and arrow set as she does.

"That was fast…" she trails off as the rest of the King's Guard greet her in low voices. "What is this?" she asks, narrowing her eyes at Kai. She shrugs on her breastplate.

"It's your armor," replies Kai, tugging at one of her straps.

She can't tell if he is referring to the King's Guard or the breastplate.

The guards shift as they prepare themselves, and Serena spots the king, waiting in the water where the tide creeps in, arms crossed.

"What is he doing here?" she whispers.

Kai leans over, whispering back, "Murphy wants the entire King's Guard to escort you."

"So?" asks Serena.

"So?" Kai blanches, no longer whispering. "We can't leave the king unprotected. If all of us are with you, he has to be with you, too."

Serena bites her bottom lip. *Maybe this was a bad idea.*

The king is going to tag along. She looks around Kai toward his majesty. Does he resent having to do this? Or was it his idea? His demeanor gives no clue; he always looks angry.

Murphy steps forward. "Where are we headed?"

Serena looks from the king, to Kai, and finally to Murphy. "Forest Beach," she says.

Murphy looks over his shoulder at the king. King Merrick nods. He is definitely still running the show.

"Very well," says Murphy. "Lead on, we will follow. But take the long way."

"The long way?" Serena asks. She isn't aware there are two separate paths—the beach is a straight shot from here.

"Go north, out of the caves, then circle around the island to come back to the beach."

Serena frowns. That route leads over the most populated spots in the kingdom.

Murphy gestures with his arm. "Maybe sometime before the moon sinks?"

"As you say," Serena mumbles, heading toward the water.

Scales push forward, covering her body as she enters. She tells herself to look straight ahead, and not glance at the king. Once the water hits her knees, she pauses, waiting for a surge in the current. When it comes, she jumps, pikes her body, and dives. By the time she has to arch her back to keep from hitting the ground, her legs have transformed into fins.

She doesn't wait or even turn back to see if the rest of the guard follows, preferring to leave the lot behind. When the entrance corridors leading to the Great Hall come into view, there are dozens of Undine flowing in and out of the caves.

Doesn't anyone ever sleep? Perhaps she isn't as different from everyone else as she thinks; or as they think.

As Serena nears, they slow to watch her pass, eyebrows raised. They aren't smirking and they aren't backing away.

Serena glances over her shoulder and the entire King's Guard comes into view. They have organized themselves into an inverted v-formation behind her, with Murphy at Serena’s left and Kai on her right. Her position, at the apex of the formation, is where the king usually resides when traveling…anywhere. Now, the king is perched in the middle of the group. He swims several spans higher where he is impossible to miss.

Buzzes and flutters arch through the ocean—the underwater chatter of Society, spreading news of an abnormality. The column moves past the entrance corridors just as a surge of Undine emerge. They scan the landscape, already aware of the excitement, then point up at the procession.

Just as before, too many eyes cause goose bumps to pop up along the back of Serena’s neck. It seems that every gawking Undine brings ten more bumps with them. Serena forces her eyes ahead, keeping her chin high.

None of this was my choice, she tells herself. *They can think what they want.*

She fingers her mother's charm fixed to her breastplate.

They leave behind the crowd at the cave entrances, drifting over the oyster gardens. More Undine watch, eyes widening in surprise at the procession behind her. Serena forces her gaze to the cages of oysters lining the bottom of the ocean. They serve to filter the water, removing algae as they feed. She relaxes a little more, the crowd of Undine isn't preferable, but it is no longer torture.

The column circles the island, and Serena leads the way back to Forest Beach, picking up speed. She is anxious to get this over with.

Angling her nose up and her fins down, Serena crests the surface in no time. She won’t take her usual precautions, surveying the empty beach from upstream then down. In fact, she isn't sure how far the procession intends to follow. Their presence alone would undo any stealthy measures Serena performs.

The sound of sputtering announce breaching Undine as they force their lungs to transform for a dry intake of air.

She looks over her shoulder, annoyed. Perhaps the King's Guard patrol route needs to include at least one stop in The Dry. That is, after all, where their enemies reside.

After all the sputtering ceases, Serena moves forward, hoping the waves breaking against the shore mask the sounds of the large group. To their credit, she does not detect one whimper when they transform fins to legs.

She steps forward, her deformed Undine webbing leaving pristine prints in the wet sand. The king, of course, stays behind in the water.

Once wet sand turns to dry, Serena stops. The column, still in formation, follows suit. The forest is loud with crickets, birds, and wind snaking through the trees, ruffling the leaves like feathers.

"What will you do?" asks Murphy, leaning forward into her ear so she can hear his whisper.

"Find my werewolf," says Serena. "I think he will help me get to the camp."

"And then what?" asks Murphy.

"I don't know." Serena shrugs. "Maybe…bowling."

"What's…bowling?"

Serena shakes her head. "I have no idea."

Murphy sighs. "I wish you'd wait until your trident training is done. Or at least until you can hit a mark with one of your arrows." He flicks at a shaft, sticking up out of the case on her back.

Serena turns, looking at him, trusting the rest of the guard to watch their backs. "I'm getting the feeling there isn't much time left, Murphy." She looks down at her feet, wiggling her stunted webbing into the sand.

Murphy smiles. "Okay, Serena Moon-Shadow. Off with you then."

She nods, turning back around. One deep breath, then a step toward the tree line.

Behind her, Serena hears the brush of armored scales coming together as the column of guards snaps to attention. Feet shuffling in sand tells her they are moving forward.

A loud thud from the ocean causes them all to turn. It is the thump of fins on water, a warning straight from the king. He pushes the majority of his torso out of the water, crossing his arms and staring Murphy down. The King's Guard is not to go any farther.

"It's okay." Serena puts a hand on Murphy's tense arm. "I've got this."

Chapter Twenty-One

Serena steps forward, unaccompanied. There is only silence behind her. Her stomach drops more with every stride, though she keeps her chin high.

Show them you aren't scared, she tells herself. The problem is, Serena doesn't know if she is trying to impress the Undine behind her or the werewolves that may lie in wait in front of her.

Pushing aside shrubs, Serena enters the tree line. Branches and leaves close in behind her as she passes, obscuring the Undine guards from view and blocking out the sounds of the ocean. Her eyes flit to the branches above, craving their safety, but she remains on the ground. If she is to be the link between Society and The Dry then she very well can't stay hidden in the trees like a scampering squirrel. Her footprints leave a long, obvious trail from sea to trees.

The wind picks up, catching a yellow flower. The bell-shaped bloom skips along the ground, turning end over end. As it passes Serena, scales emerge over her ankles and up her legs—a precaution. She pauses, watching it float by. Even the shrubs on the ground seem to lean away from it.

Serena takes a deep breath, waiting for the rest of her scales to emerge. It stings worse when she is in The Dry. When she steps forward, parting the bushes, her tree comes into view. Only some of the wolfsbane scattered on the ground has succumbed to the wind. Most of it remains, along with the braided wolfsbane ropes wrapped around the tree. The end of the ropes have unraveled, and swing loose in the breeze, just like the kelp forest outside of her cave. It feels like home.

Drawing closer, her eyes drop to the ground and she freezes. Just outside of the wolfsbane flowers rests a steady stream of wolf prints. In places, the prints are so thick they overlap each other so there is no way to establish where one ends and the other begins. There is one long, circular path—a border created between her tree and the rest of The Dry. It smells like wet dog.

She bends down, tracing the outline of one of the prints. The tip of her scaled finger pushes through dirt, wet granules sliding across and

resettling alongside the impression. Serena moves to another print, doing the same. They are all the same length and width, and each has a deeper groove toward the right side of every other print.

A werewolf spent a significant amount of time here, walking circle after circle, creating a boundary line.

Her neck prickles; she turns, surveying the tree line, but there is nothing.

She grits her teeth together. *If I can't take a single tree, how can the Undine expect to take back the beaches? This is my tree. MINE.* She won't be made to feel terrified in her own home. Or at least her home away from home. Serena walks into the wolfsbane, untying the basket she left tethered to the tree.

After a quick trip to the wolfsbane gardens, she returns with a full basket. Dropping to her hands and knees, she works as the moon moves across the sky, replacing what flowers blew away and then some. Serena extends the circle, covering each footprint with at least five flowers. After the yellow petals cover a large span past the wolf-made border, she pauses, looking at the tree stump. It is the stump where the wolf sat as he introduced himself.

"Liam of Clan Werich," Serena says to herself, out loud. She is surprised she could remember the foreign words. "Well, Liam—I suppose I can allow you some entrance into my court."

The wolfsbane has just reached the stump. Here, Serena extends it farther, elongating one side so her perfect circle has become a lopsided oval. Then, she removes enough petals to clear a narrow path from the outside to the stump.

A grand entrance, she thinks. *Or grand enough for a hound, anyway.*

She smiles and turns, surveying the tree. Now—time to do something with these swinging ropes.

Serena decides to go with the kelp effect and gets to work tightening the existing ropes and constructing new braids. When the first is done, she removes an arrow from her quiver and ties the braid of flowers to the shaft.

She looks around, Murphy's words nagging her. *We don't want to give your enemies a chance to observe you.* Serena shrugs. This isn't exactly target practice.

She nocks her arrow, then raises her hands, aiming into the sky. The string is tight, but she manages to pull it back to the corner of her mouth. *Easy…easy.* Relaxing the fingers of her string hand, she releases the arrow. Serena watches it take flight, dragging the braided line of wolfsbane behind it. It arches up, and at its apex, a thin, silvery line slices through the silhouette of the moon.

The rope catches over one of the higher branches and the line goes taut, the arrow jerking back. It bounces a couple times before settling into a futile swing back and forth in the wind.

Perfect, Serena smiles.

She climbs two branches to retrieve the arrow, then she does it all over again with another line of flowers. By the time the moon sinks into the ocean, and the sun rises to take its place, the tree is adorned in dozens of yellow tendrils, swaying aimless in the wind.

Serena retrieves her arrow from the last strand of wolfsbane, and replaces it in her quiver. Standing on a low branch with one foot slightly in front of the other, she raises her chin. Her strong stance is interrupted by the slow-moving strings of poison blowing in the breeze as she leans around them. Even though she is fully scaled, she doesn't want to take any chances.

"Where are you, Liam of Clan Werich?" she asks aloud.

I will listen for your call. Serena remembers what Liam told her. Then there was Murphy's piece of information. *You have a very distinct call.*

Serena didn't think there was anything unique about her clicks and whistles, but then again, she never had to use them much. There just wasn't anyone to call.

She opens up her gills along her neck, sucking in cool air and expending it through her mouth. The sound starts as a low hum in her throat, then breezes past her lips in a whistle. Her throat rhythmically closes and opens, adding clipped clicks to the song.

She stops, listening for the echo. The birds and insects of the forest have gone silent, as if they are listening, too. It comes back to her, distorted and murky, as usual in The Dry.

Serena readjusts her breastplate and quiver, waiting. She counts out the span of fifty breakers, then tries again. The birds and insects do not resume their noisy, early-morning chatter. Instead, Serena hears footsteps.

She can imagine Liam, in his wolf form, leaning harder to his right side than his left as his prints showed her. Like Ervin—only opposite.

He noses his way through the bushes and Serena stands taller, watching his every movement. He doesn't seem as big this time, and the teeth hanging through his lips not nearly so long. But it is definitely Liam, his crescent moon-shaped marking bright among the rest of his facial fur.

The wolf approaches the wolfsbane, pausing every few feet to sniff at the circle, cringe, and look up at Serena. Around the side of the tree, his path wavers as he moves in and out, as if the circle might retract when he comes closer. This time when he disappears behind the tree, Serena does not strain to look.

She hears popping and groaning, and the rustling of leaves—then Ungainly footsteps. When he comes back into sight, Serena looks at her nails, pretending to pick at them. It is useless because her fingers are covered in scales.

"Bringin' your home to work with you?"

She purses her lips. "What?" Serena finally looks at him and sees he is wrapped in his cape again.

Where does he hide that thing?

"You made your point with the wolfsbane." He moves to kick at one of the flowers sticking up out of the ground, then thinks better of it. "But did you really have to turn your tree into a giant jellyfish?"

Serena smiles, her eyes lighting up as she looks around. He’s right. With the umbrella-shaped canopy pulsating in the wind, and the trailing tentacles that come complete with their own sting, she brought the oldest multi-organ sea animal with her to The Dry.

She looks back at the wolf. "Happy birthday."

There is a split second, where his eyes widen, almost with shock, and his face splits open in a grin—then laughter.

Serena doesn't understand the humor; it was meant as sarcasm. She's been witness to more than one Ungainly birthday, celebrated on the beach, always with gifts and games. It struck her as odd, more than once, how many of them prefer to be close to water when commemorating their birth event.

His laughter trails off as Serena shifts on her branch. The bow still feels awkward in her hands.

I wish I still had Kai's trident.

The wolf readjusts his cape, then saunters over to the tree branch. He makes a show of sucking in to attempt the narrow path to his stump. When he reaches it, he has to back his heels up against it to keep his toes from hitting wolfsbane.

"I guess you didn't realize just how big my feet are," he says, with a nervous laugh.

"Hmm." Serena grunts, channeling Ronan. She at least knows exactly how big his wolf prints are—she'd spent almost the entire night filling in his prints with wolfsbane.

He finally sits, knees up into his chest to avoid flowers. "So, Serena Moon-Shadow. What would you like to discuss?"

"Discuss?" Serena asks.

The wolf puts one hand over his heart, and holds the other in the air. "I propose a temporary truce, in order that we may confer." His voice is high and nasally, mocking her.

Serena steps forward. "I wouldn't call forcing a border between my tree and the rest of your lands a truce, exactly."

His eyes narrow. "And I wouldn't call shovin' a wolfsbane-laced trident in my face a truce, exactly."

Serena presses her lips together. "I was protecting myself. I didn't know your intentions—I still don't."

"And I don't know yours."

She crosses her arms, resisting the urge to stamp in frustration.

"Maybe," the wolf taps his chin, "we can just start by asking each other questions."

Serena shrugs. "Okay, I'll start—since you must still be recovering from that trident that nearly touched your face what…two moons ago?"

The wolf's face goes blank. He is masking an emotion, and Serena doubts it is more humor.

"Where do you hide your cape?" she asks.

He furrows his eyebrows. Thick, they almost touch each other in the center. "That is what you want to know?"

Serena sits down on her branch, legs hanging down from either side. "I thought we'd start simple."

"The answer…is not exactly simple. In fact, I'll take a pass on that question."

Serena crosses her arms. "We are not getting off to a good start here."

He plays with a frayed edge of his cape. "Shall I—?"

"I get another question," Serena interrupts. "Two, in fact. For every one that you don't answer."

He sighs, readjusting the placement of his feet, trying to keep them as far from the wolfsbane as possible.

"You can shift anytime, not only under the full moon?" she asks. The answer is obvious, given the form he arrived in. But right now Serena just wants to get him talking.

Liam looks up into the sky. The moon is a solid crescent tonight, the shape of the birthmark on his face. "Yes," he says.

"Is it the same with all werewolves?"

He pauses for a moment, debating how to answer. "No."

His hesitation was enough; Serena can't fully trust his answer.

The wind picks up and a braided rope swings precariously close to Serena. She leans out of the way.

"Is wolfsbane poisonous to mermaids, too?" Liam asks.

"It's Undine, and is that your question?"

He pauses for a moment. "Yes."

Serena leans away as the braided rope swings back through. She frowns, not wanting to reveal wolfsbane is harmful to Undine, too. They could find a way to use it against her people. This little game is getting more complicated than she expected.

"Two questions for every one you don't answer," taunts Liam.

It is Serena's turn to sigh. "This isn't going to work."

"Ah, and so the tables have turned."

Serena frowns at his statement, looking around. There are no tables, and the only thing turning is the earth they stand on.

Liam stands, brushing off his cape. "We need to start with somethin' a little less damnin'."

Some of his vocabulary can be confusing. She rubs her temples and feels warm light hit her back. The sun has crested the treetops. She doesn't have much time left. Dry sun is harsh on Undine skin and scales, plus it brings out the Ungainlies. "How about we start with a favor?"

Pausing, Liam looks up at Serena. "What kind of favor?"

"Show me your camp." Holding her breath, Serena holds his gaze, trying to put off an air of composure.

"Why?" he asks.

Serena blinks. *Oh no—I don't answer this question very well*, she thinks of the denial to visit the King's Library after the king himself asked 'why'. She tugs at the bottom of her breastplate, stalling. She could go with the truth, that it is a task assigned to her as a punishment or that Society wants to learn everything they can about the werewolves, but neither of those sit well even with Serena.

"Well," she starts. "The Undine created werewolves. During caste lessons we learned that maidens watched over you, just as you watched over us—in the beginning, at least."

So far so good, Serena judges Liam's reaction. His eyes seemed to have softened a bit.

"I know things have gone terribly wrong, but I believe there is a general feeling from each side that we want to fix this." Serena doesn't know that to be true, but she hopes it is. If the ocean is delivering the Undine ashore in order for their species to survive, it needs to be in the hands of allies, not enemies.

"The maidens are…concerned." Serena remembers Isadora and her request. Now that she thinks about it, was that desperation lining Isadora's eyes as she asked about Alaric? She looks back at Liam, resolve in her voice. "They want to know the werewolves are alive and well." Serena either believes her own lie, or it is no lie at all.

After a long pause, Liam stands up from his stump. He makes his way out of the wolfsbane path, then turns with a flourish. "I swear by my life, all of Clan Werich is alive and well."

Serena shakes her head. "I must see it for myself."

Running a hand through his hair, Liam huffs. He paces back and forth, constantly looking at Serena as if her true intentions might be written on her face.

He needs more convincing.

"I will be in the unique situation of being the only Undine to view the werewolf camp, at least so far as I know. I will pass on only as much information is as needed to convince my king and council to take the peaceful path," Serena says. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

He huffs again but stops pacing. "Okay, I'll take you. But you must stay hidden, and your arrows stay here."

Serena stands, frozen to the tree branch, momentarily stunned by her victory. She has convinced him to trust her, but she still isn't sure if she

can trust a werewolf. *This is the very species that killed my parents,* Serena reminds herself.

"Well, little bird?" Liam taps his foot on the ground. "Are you going to fly down?"

His nickname for her makes her feel vulnerable, and leaving her only weapons behind isn't going to help that. But he is giving her an ultimate sign of trust by showing her the camp, she can at least return the favor.

Serena drops her bow and arrow set on the tree branch and jumps down. A puff of yellow petals rise up at her landing. They float back to the ground like sand after it is picked up by a tumultuous wave.

Bending down, Serena plucks a wolfsbane flower out of the ground by its stem. She twirls it in between her thumb and forefinger, bringing it up to her nose. From over the top of the petals she looks over at Liam, her mind made up.

"Okay. Show me Camp Werich."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"After you." Serena gestures toward Liam. They stand across from each other, one surrounded in yellow—the other, not so much.

He strolls, circling the border of flowers. Stopping at the end closest to the ocean, he holds out the crook of his elbow for Serena to take his arm.

"I don't think so," says Serena. "I'll walk behind you."

Liam turns his head before shrugging in defeat and sauntering away from the sound of crashing waves.

Serena follows, pausing at the edge of the flowers. The gravity of The Dry is pulling down on her and everything seems too heavy. She can't bring herself to cross into unprotected land with Liam right in front of her.

"It's called trust, Werewolf Liaison." Liam pauses several spans ahead and looks over his shoulder. "You can't do your job if you don't trust me."

Why not?

As she steps out of the circle the wind picks up—there is a rush of musty forest and wolf scent. Serena cringes, expecting a flurry of claws and fangs to follow. Nothing happens.

One eye opens, and then another. The wolf is still in front of her, walking away. The wolfsbane flower remains clutched to Serena’s chest, as she tentatively takes another step to follow.

The wolf's steps are light, barely making a sound through the forest. He knows which places to avoid, and where he can put his full weight.

"Would it help if I were in my animal form?" Liam's voice is distant as he faces forward. "It could be like the old days, a mermaid with her werewolf protector."

"The old days are long gone—your clan made sure of that."

Liam pauses, arching his shoulders together like Serena has stabbed him in the back. He whips around to face her.

Like muscle memory, Serena reaches for an arrow. It isn't there.

"Our clan had its reasons for that night," Liam narrows his eyes. Serena thinks she sees a flare of red in them, though it could be a trick of the sunlight.

"What reason did they have for killing my mother? Or what about my father?" Anger heats her cheeks.

Liam drops his arms to his sides. "Both your parents?"

"Among others," Serena answers, raising her chin. She swallows the hard lump that forms in her throat, refusing to the let the wolf revel in the pain his clan has caused her.

The wolf shakes his head. "You don't know the whole story, for what it truly is, Serena Moon-Shadow."

"And you do?"

He nods. "More than you, I'm sure."

Could he have even been there?

"How old are you, wolf?"

He smiles. "No older than you."

Serena takes a breath, willing her temper to calm. A cool wind carrying the smell of salt and seaweed tickles the back of her neck. "At least now we are getting some questions answered. Kind of." She looks down at her wolfsbane flower in her hand. "Tell me your story of that night."

He moves toward her, stepping into a swath of light filtering through the canopy. "If you return to me, I'll tell you as much as I'm allowed." He bows, then turns with a flourish of his cape, cutting off her chance to press him further.

They continue the walk in silence, Serena maintaining distance behind him. She rubs at the charm on her breastplate trying to memorize and categorize important pieces of their conversation, filing them away like books in the archives.

The terrain tilts up, gradually becoming steeper. After awhile Serena is leaning forward for more momentum, her breath labored. Just as she is about to request a break, Liam stops by an especially large tree and disappears around the back of it.

"What are you doing?" Serena asks, taking a step back. She glances behind her, suspecting some sort of trap. "Liam?"

A cape flies out from behind the tree, directly at her. Unfurling as it makes an arch in the air, Serena throws one hand in front of her face. The cape wraps around her arm, smelling of stale earth and wet dog.

"We are almost there, and I don't want to risk them smellin' you," says Liam.

Shaking out the cape, Serena allows the rest of it to unfold. "Gross," she says, as bits of dirt and shaggy hair tumble off. But she wraps the cape around her shoulders, tying it off under her chin as Liam's is. It settles

over her scales, itchy and uncomfortable like the blankets in the orphanage.

"Just keep it closed in the front as best you can. And pull the hood up," Liam begins walking again. No longer on a path, they are pushing their way through thick shrubbery.

Serena obliges, lifting a hood that hangs off the back of the cape over her head. It almost hangs past her eyes. She turns her head to sniff. "Exactly how many wolves have worn this before me?" she asks.

"Shh," Liam hushes her. "No more talking." All at once his movements become slow and deliberate. Every move forward is calculated and he emits no sound at all.

Standing behind him, Serena stares at his wide shoulders working to push aside leafy branches. He turns, motioning her forward.

Serena steps through to a small clearing. She stands in the shadows of two shorter trees that have grown toward each other. Their limbs intertwine just above Liam's head, so it feels as though they are in a small cave.

"Stay in the shadows," Liam leans close to whisper in her ear. "And they won't see you."

Barely noticing his breath on her cheek, Serena's gaze is transfixed on the scene before her. On flat ground following a steep cliff beneath her, there are as many as thirty trailer homes, in varying degrees of quality but for the most part unkempt and shabby.

Still early in the morning, the camp is quiet and still. On the far right end, a trailer door swings open and the man that walks out automatically raises his hand to shield his eyes from the bright sun. Staggering toward a truck he reaches inside for a small rectangular package. He coughs as he pulls a slender object from the package and lights it from a small flame he holds in his hand.

Serena raises a questioning eyebrow at Liam.

"Cigarettes…it's…I'll explain later."

When he steps alongside her, Serena moves the wolfsbane from one hand to the other so it remains between them.

She turns her attention back to the camp. Draped on a thin line tied from one trailer to another is several capes, along with various other Ungainly-like clothing. "So you *do* wash them," whispers Serena.

Liam smiles, glancing at the cape on her shoulders. "Some of them."

"Do all of the werewolves live here?" she asks, counting the trailers.

Liam nods. "Most trailers have two pack members."

"So there are—"

"Fifty two of us," says Liam.

"The Undine…*made* that many?" Serena asks.

"Yes—made them," Liam's fingers bend in air quotes as he says the phrase. "Then dumped them on the beach to be delivered and raised here."

His tone has grown tense, and Serena isn't sure she should continue with her line of questioning, especially not this far away from safety, but she can't let the opportunity pass by.

She clears her throat and clutches at the stem of the flower. "Do you know how we made them?"

Shadows of the leaves overhead dance across his features, but Liam remains stock still, staring at Serena. Several moments pass, and Serena debates holding her hand up to his mouth to check his breath.

"You don't know?" he finally asks.

"No," Serena scowls in annoyance—mostly because she is choosing to ask a werewolf about Undine history instead of her own kind.

Knitting his brows together, Liam answers carefully. "I think that is something to ask your mother—" Liam cuts himself off, remembering too late that Serena is an orphan. "Oh, ah— sorry." He shakes his head, cheeks turning red. He kicks at the pebbles in their small clearing.

"Never mind," mumbles Serena. "I guess what I want to know is, have the werewolves had much luck mating?"

Now Liam's cheeks turn crimson, and he gives a strangled sort of cough. Before he can string together any intelligible words, several high-pitched yelps of delight catch their attention.

Serena and Liam look down in time to see kids running out of one of the trailers.

"You have!" Serena steps forward, eyes glued to the three small boys.

In no time each of the boys have found a long stick. They thrust at each other as they run around the trailer, the clacking noise of the sticks ringing across camp. "Unless they are Ungainly?" She raises her nose to the air and sniffs. "I can't tell—the air is much too saturated here."

"Half werewolf, half Ungainly," answers Liam.

"It doesn't matter," says Serena. "You found a way." She feels a lump forming in her throat and drops her wolfsbane flower, the revelation of

new life blasting through fabricated barriers.

"Boys!" a woman emerges from the trailer. "It's too early, you'll wake everyone up. Inside to eat your breakfast—now!"

Liam gestures to her. "Their mother is human, the only one at camp. She married a werewolf and they had three boys. They are the only ones we know of that possess the ability to transform—all the others just come out as humans without a shred of wolf to them."

"Are they here too?" Serena asks. "You said she is the only Ungainly at camp."

"Alaric doesn't let them stay—they are sent packin' with their human mothers. Alaric agreed to let this human stay because she gave birth to the wolves, but also because she is a nurse. She is the only medical care we get." Liam's cheek color has finally returned to normal.

Serena nods, squinting at the other trailers. "Alaric," she repeats the name Isadora uttered. "Where is he?"

A howl bursts through the trees from behind Serena and Liam, blowing past them and down into the valley of trailers. The echo bounces back, followed by the sound of several tin metal doors slamming open. Six large men race out of their houses at the howl.

"What is that?" asks Serena, the scales on the back of her neck standing up.

"That is your Alaric," says Liam. "If you've had your fill of the camp, we can go see him."

Serena watches the men shift into wolves as they run. They disappear into the tree line, a trail of shredded clothes in their wake.

"Your head is glowing," Liam observes.

"Yeah, that happens." Serena isn't sure she wants to seek Alaric. Something tells her she is better off facing the entire werewolf camp instead.

She follows Liam back through the forest, away from the camp. Although they are walking downhill, her legs feel like lead. With every step, Serena clutches the werewolf cape tighter and tighter around herself. The only reassurance is the sound of crashing waves in the distance that seems to be getting louder.

Finally, they are back on terrain she knows—flat ground and towering trees. Pushing their way through trees, the sun filters down through thick foliage piercing Serena even through the cape and her scales beneath.

"Here," Liam whispers, ducking behind a falling log.

Serena drops to her knees next to him and squints, focusing her eyes through the shrubs and onto the brightening shoreline. The entire King's Guard stands in a line on the beach, with King Merrick still in the water behind them. They are tense, holding their tridents at the ready, heads turning slowly and in unison.

Serena's gaze floats to where they stare. A large, hulking man paces the beach, just out of the tree line in front of them. Six wolves stroll the beach around him, casting wary glances at the Undine.

"Our agreement?" The man shouts out to King Merrick in the waves. His voice is thick and gravelly.

The King moves closer, raising his upper body out of the ocean. He points his trident at the man. "Has not yet run its course."

"Time is almost up, Merrick. My clan is anxious to know—will you follow through with your promise?" The man has long, black hair that hangs wild and loose past his shoulders, blending in with the cape on his back.

"What promise?" Serena whispers to Liam.

He shrugs. "I don't know."

King Merrick is pacing in the breakers, swimming back and forth, almost a mirror image to the man on the beach. They are both agitated. Finally, the king stops, and raises himself up again. "And if I've changed my mind?"

Lips curling up in a snarl, the man on the beach growls. "Only one other sacrifice will satisfy the debt, Merrick."

Slinking back down into the water, the king's words aren't audible to Serena over the sound of the breakers, but he is nodding his head. He turns away, then looks over his shoulder. "You will have your answer soon, Alaric."

"What sacrifice?" Serena hisses at Liam. "Me?"

"Why would he sacrifice you?" Liam looks at her, eyes narrowed.

"I don't know," says Serena, panic building. "But it would certainly explain why I am the Werewolf Liaison!"

"Calm down," he says reaching toward her.

Serena falls on her backside, scrambling away from his outstretched hand. "Keep away!"

Liam nervously glances out at the guards. He pulls his hand back, and raises them both in the air. "Okay, okay. Just—shh. At least until Alaric leaves."

"Who is Alaric to you?" Serena asks, freezing in her awkward, crab-walk stance.

Liam grimaces. "My father—kind of."

"Kind of?" she asks, getting back to her feet, brushing dirt from her scaled legs. She tries to hide the fact that her arms are shaking with fear. After all, Liam showed her the camp, and returned her to the beach.

"At least, the closest I have to a father," Liam picks dead bark off the log in front of them.

Serena thinks of Ronan. "I know what you mean…kind of," she says.

This elicits a small smile from Liam. He stands, sniffing the air. "Okay, he's gone."

Serena watches the king disappear below water, followed by a column of guard members. "I need to find out what that was all about," she says.

"I'll ask around, too—let you know what I find out next time we meet."

"Why?" Serena asks.

He looks at her, confused.

"I mean, why would you do that for me?" she clarifies.

"What he's doin' is just plain wrong." He nods to the beach where Alaric stood. "Alaric feels betrayed, and he is hell-bent on revenge."

"*He* feels betrayed?" Serena asks, mouth dropping open.

"Yes," Liam frowns. "And he is experimentin' with the pack, trying to make them stronger." Liam extends a hand and pulls back his cape, exposing the soft skin on the inside of his arm. There are dozens of small pinprick marks. "It is how more and more of us can shift without the full moon."

"And you let him?" Serena steps forward, extending a finger to his wounds.

"He runs the show," Liam shrugs. "We haven't had much choice until now. But then those boys came and…" Liam trails off, swallowing hard.

"And you can't let the same thing happen to them," Serena finishes for him, dropping her hand to her side. "So you are finally ready to fight for your future." Her voice drops as a frown creases her face.

"What?" asks Liam.

Serena takes a deep breath. "The problem is, so are we."

The pair stare at each other, an unspoken truce binding them together as they realize they might just have an ally in facing their obstacles.

Serena doesn't have a chance to ask further questions. The tips of a trident pierce through the shrubs, directly in between her and Liam. It swings wide, then comes back, pulling Liam with it. Caught in the chest, just underneath the arms, Liam disappears through the bush.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Halt!" Serena hears through the bushes. It is Ervin's voice, deeper than usual, and loud.

Oh no.

Serena pushes her way through, rogue branches grabbing at her hair and scraping down her scales. When she stumbles onto the beach, her eyes go wide and her breath catches in her throat.

Ervin pins Liam to the ground with one foot on his chest, and another guard has his trident at Liam's throat.

"Pull back your trident!" Serena yells at the guard. She turns to Ervin. "Release him."

Liam scrambles back, getting on his feet as the two guards loosen their hold.

"Back off, just stand down," Serena hisses at Ervin and two other guards. The rest must have left with the king.

Glancing at Liam, Serena can see short, stiff hairs pop out, bristling along his neck. She steps toward him. "I'll take care of this. Just—trust me."

Serena crosses in between Liam and the armed Undine to stand at Ervin's side.

"Is this one of them?" Ervin asks through gritted teeth. "He smells like dog."

Liam sniffs. "You smell like fish. There is no denying the mermaid, or…mer…man?"

"Undine!" Serena and Ervin say together.

Ervin steps forward, gills flaring.

"No." Serena puts her hand on Ervin's arm. "Let him go."

Ervin tenses even more, and the men behind him do the same.

"Show him mercy? Like he did the night of the maiden massacre?" Ervin isn't backing down.

"Look at him, Ervin. He isn't even old enough to have been there. Killing him would only spark a war. One for which we aren't prepared." Serena looks at Ervin. "Let me do my job."

Ervin shakes his head. "No, I'd rather see his pelt on the end of my trident."

"What shall I tell the king, then?" Serena asks, glancing at Ervin out of the corner of her eye, then returning her gaze to Liam. "That you interfered with the Werewolf Liaison's duty? That you willingly sabotaged a direct order from the king himself?"

Ervin stops moving forward, but refuses to break his gaze from his enemy.

"Besides," Serena says. "You no longer have a trident. Remember?"

Ervin flinches and turns, eyes full of fury. At least if his anger is directed toward her, Liam will be left alone.

After a short stare-down, Ervin brushes past her, toward the water. He shoulders her in the process, causing Serena to stumble back a few steps. Ervin splashes, very Ungainly-like, into the ocean. The two others back up from Liam, only turning when their feet hit the waves.

Serena lets out a shaky breath. With a quick glance at Liam who is still standing at the tree line with his hands hanging at his sides, Serena turns away, following Ervin.

She waits until she is fully submerged to cross her legs, transforming them back into fins. She can feel Liam's eyes on her, and his words are still ringing in her head—*You smell like fish*. The slight stings worse than scales poking through her skin.

Ervin swims fast, taking sharp turns and occasionally glaring back at her. Her best friend is angry, but that she can handle. It is better than having Liam upset with her. He could tear her to bits. Shredded, bloody, fish bits.

Serena swats a lone jellyfish out of the way as she swims, trying to keep up with Ervin. He is going straight to the Great Hall—Serena won't have a chance to ask the king about his conversation with Alaric right away.

Besides the four of them, there isn't a single Undine spotted on the way to the Great Hall.

No, Serena thinks, *they are all already in it, ready to watch me take center stage.* She'll have to report her findings to the council.

Ervin reaches the steps first, fins transforming back into feet. He does so slowly, as if he is waiting for Serena to catch up. When Serena does, moving to stand beside him, she glances at his heaving shoulders.

The quick swim, strong as he has become, still takes a toll on him. He isn't meant for the King's Guard.

Oyster farmer, Serena thinks. She remembers how excited he was, returning from the oyster farms on the trip with his caste. The usefulness of oyster farming, the productivity. Serena wonders how productive he finds guard duty, doing the same rounds day after day.

When she looks at him, Ervin doesn't return the favor.

"Come on," he says. "You're late."

Not my fault, Serena aches to argue. But it would just come off as petty, so she stays quiet.

A few strides of bitter silence, and breathes out through clenched teeth. "You didn't have to belittle me in front of him."

"How did I belittle you? I was standing *with* you," she said.

"You pointed out that I didn't have my trident—like I lost it."

"So?" She brushes back a wet strand of hair plastered to the side of her face.

"So?" Ervin makes a fist, slamming it into the side of one of the corridor walls. "I looked like a fool. No King's Guard is ever caught in front of the enemy without his trident."

"For Poseidon's sake, Ervin—he doesn't know that."

"Doesn't he?" Ervin stops walking, the entrance to the Great Hall just ahead. The other two guards pause as well, but give Serena and Ervin their space. Ervin crosses his arms and turns to Serena, lowering his voice. "I think there is too much that *you* don't know. You are going to put yourself in unnecessary danger."

"This *job* is an unnecessary danger," Serena hisses back at him. "And you heard the king, conferring with the wolf himself. Why does he even need me?"

Unless I am the sacrifice…

Serena turns back to Ervin, distracted. "If there is something you think I should know, tell me now. Because neither you, nor any of the King's Guard," Serena makes a pointed look at the other two, keeping their distance, "will be accompanying me to the beach again."

Ervin uncrosses his arms, hands squeezing open then closed, and finally rubbing the back of his neck. Serena rolls her eyes. *He honestly has no idea what to do without his trident.*

"Well?" she asks.

Ervin sighs. "Has it ever occurred to you to ask for permission to the King's Library?"

"Of course," Serena says. "Mariam always denies it."

"Because you need express permission from the king."

"The king has also denied permission." Serena narrows her eyes at him. "Why would his library help me anyway? Have you been in there?"

Ervin shrugs. "Part of the training. We have to know every nook and cranny of the kingdom. We were allowed in once under the watchful eyes of Mariam. There is a whole section on werewolves."

Beside him, the other two are nodding their heads. "A section on Ungainlies, too," one says.

"And mating and birthing," offers the other.

Serena widens his eyes.

"Excuse me, gentlemen?"

Everyone turns, snapping to attention at Nerin's voice. She stands at the arched entrance, chin high, hands clasped in front of her.

"We have been waiting for the presence of the Werewolf Liaison to report her findings. So if you are finished with your discussion about mating and birthing..." She gestures to the entrance. "You may escort Serena in."

Each guard offers a short bow to the King's Second, then shuffles into the Great Hall with red cheeks. Serena follows.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Great Hall is packed shoulder to shoulder with Undine once more. A path clears, making way for the three guards that enter, then an even wider berth for Serena.

"Have they come to see that my punishment was fulfilled?" Serena asks Nerin with a grimace on her face.

"The king has ordered that all Undine be present," Nerin whispers back. "He even took roll." She doesn't give Serena a chance to think about the dozens of maidens staring at them. "Back straight, shoulders relaxed," Nerin instructs. "And keep your eyes forward. On the king, if you must."

Serena obliges. The faces grey out in her peripheral vision as she focuses on the king. After the werewolf camp, Alaric, and fighting with her best friend, the king is easy.

Serena and Nerin step up to the mid-platform, and curtsy in unison. On one side of them is the line of council members, on the other side is the line of guards, with Kai and Murphy flanking the ends.

"You're late," says the king. He reminds Serena of Ervin. No one is in a good mood.

"I was not able to inform the Werewolf Liaison when she should return to Assembly, your majesty. She left for her mission too quickly."

Serena is thankful Nerin didn't say 'punishment'. Especially since Kai is standing right there.

"As you say." The king sits up in his chair, looking at Serena. "Let's begin. You carried out your punishment?"

Serena's shoulders sag. A sharp elbow from Nerin reminds her to stand up straight.

"Yes, your majesty," Serena glances at the council.

He continues looking at Serena, leaning forward in his chair.

"I was led to the camp by a werewolf ally—or, at least I think he is an ally…" Serena trails off.

"Alaric?" Isadora leans forward from the line of council members to ask.

"No," Serena answers. She almost has to choke back a snicker at the thought of her and Alaric huddled together in the shadows of the trees, spying on the werewolf camp. She clears her throat. "Though I did see Alaric."

"And?" Isadora stands on the balls of her feet.

"And," answers Serena, lifting her chin to King Merrick. "I believe the king himself knows enough of Alaric's well-being."

Isadora's eyes flit to the throne, red crawling up her cheeks until she looks like a black mountain, spewing hot lava out the top.

"I will consult with you later on the topic, Isadora," says the king, dismissing her with a flippant wave of his hand.

These two definitely have in-law issues.

"What I want to know," says the king. "Are the werewolf numbers. And how are they surviving? Where do they get their food? Why do they stay here, if they are so easily integrated into Ungainly life? Why haven't they moved away—or maybe half of them have?" With each question, the king leans further forward until Serena is sure he is going to attempt to stand up on his tail. "Do they have offspring?"

"Yes," says Serena, squeezing in at least one answer. "There are little ones."

The entire room goes so quiet, Serena can hear her own heart thumping in her chest.

"Younger than you?" Nerin asks by her side. It is practically a whisper. "And they are definitely werewolves?"

"Kind of," Serena breaks decorum to brush a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "As we know, there are no female werewolves, so some of the wolves have mated with Ungainly women. Mostly the offspring born are just more Ungainlies, and they are sent away. But one Ungainly gave birth to three male wolves; and the clan keeps the boys and their mother with them."

"This Ungainly," asks the king. "Is she special in some way?"

"I don't know—I just saw her from a distance."

"Well there has to be some potion," the king turns to his council members, raising his eyebrow at the healer. "Or some divine guidance?" Now he pins Isadora with his stare.

They all lift their shoulders or return blank looks.

"A scientific explanation, then. Do they mate on the full moon? Does their diet make them more virile?

"Your majesty," Serena interrupts. "I apologize, but the few discussions I've had with my werewolf confidante do not broach those subjects."

"Well why not?" It is the same booming voice, but complaining edges his tone.

Before she can stop herself, Serena glances at Kai. He is standing so stiff and straight, he could school Nerin in the art. She frowns, but doesn't answer the king's question. Everyone in the Great Hall seem to be waiting for the king to calm down.

After a few moments, he takes a deep breath. "How many are there?"

"My escort reported there are fifty-two of them, your majesty," says Serena.

"Forty-nine, plus the three young ones," the king exchanges a glance with Nerin. "None have left."

"They are half our numbers," says Murphy, speaking up from the line of guards.

"But each are twice our size," comments Nerin. "At least in their werewolf form."

"Did you see any weapons?" Murphy asks Serena.

She glances from Murphy to the king, and back again. "Why? Are we going to attack?"

"We are only concerned with protecting our own interests," says Nerin.

The king huffs, his long beard vibrating with the motion.

Shifting on her feet, Serena suddenly remembers she left her bow and arrow up in her tree. Her hand twitches, itching to leave the court and retrieve her property.

It's safe, she tells herself. *It is surrounded by wolfsbane.*

"Has my punishment been fulfilled?" asks Serena.

Without even glancing at Isadora, the king nods. "We will have more questions later, and expect them to be answered in detail," he raises his eyebrow. "But you have done well, Werewolf Liaison."

Serena curtseys, accepting his praise.

"I have something for you," he says.

Straightening in surprise, Serena folds her hands together. "For me?"

The third punishment is to come from Zayla, Serena thinks. Nonetheless, she sucks in a breath, waiting to hear what further penance she must pay.

"It comes from myself, my second…"

Nerin makes a small bow of her head in acknowledgement.

This is going to be bad.

"My council…"

They bow too, Zayla's much slighter than everyone else's, and Isadora's non-existent.

"My council," the king repeats, looking directly at Isadora.

She bows.

He nods, satisfied they all acknowledge this is a gift from them to Serena. "And the King's Guard."

A ripple of murmurs run through the crowd.

This is going to be really bad.

The King's Guard moves to attention in unison at Murphy's call. In one smooth movement, they each place a closed fist over their heart, bow their head, then return to parade rest, hands clasped behind their backs.

When Serena, Nerin, and all of Society behind them look back at the king, he is holding a new trident. He brings it up to balance in the palm of his hand. His fist closes around it, and he throws his arm forward, releasing the weapon.

The trident sails toward Serena, pointy end first. Nerin leaps to the side, and Serena hears the crowd gasp behind her. There is a shuffle, a mad scuffle of hands and feet scrambling to get out of the way.

Serena remains steady. Her hand shoots up, muscle memory. As many times as Kai has made her catch the training tridents during her one session, she now knows why.

As soon as her hand grasps one of the two twisted stems, she rotates her wrist. She doesn't fight the momentum, and her arm falls back. Her shoulder strains under the force; the king has a good arm. Three sharp tips scrape the cave floor. The high-pitched zing echoes in the cavern as Serena completes the rotation in front of her. It is one full spin, then a switch of hands. She comes to attention, settling the trident by her side, pointy end up.

Prongs, she can hear Kai chastising as he did during their lesson. *Not pointy end.*

Serena smiles.

Behind her, all movement has stopped. Only the dying echo of the ringing prongs can be heard reverberating against the walls.

The king smiles, too. "Well done, Werewolf Liaison."

"I'll say." Nerin tries to compose herself next to Serena, wiping cave debris off of her. Her leap must have ended poorly. "Though you might warn us next time, your majesty?" Nerin keeps her distance from the trident. She turns her head toward Serena, but doesn't look at her. "And in your next training session, you might learn to not leave a permanent mark every time you wield your weapon in the Great Hall?"

Serena looks down, spotting three deep gashes in the otherwise smooth floor. Though the rest of the ground is naturally rough, here on the mid-platform, the surface has been sanded smooth; until now. Serena runs her bared toes over the incisions, then looks at the prongs. Not a scratch on them.

Her smile grows bigger. She catches Kai's eye. He winks at her.

"If we can conclude Assembly?" asks Nerin. "I think we've had enough excitement for today, and Serena will need time…" Nerin glances at the trident. "To practice with her new weapon—far away from the Great Hall." *And me.*

Serena can see the last two words on Nerin's lips, though she doesn't speak them out loud.

"Very well," nods the king.

Serena puts up her finger.

"Do you have something to add, Serena Moon-Shadow?"

"Just one request, your majesty."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Your permission to access the King's Library."

"Why?" asks the king.

Serena's grip on her new trident tightens. Like last time she asked, she does not expect a question; just permission. "To do my job," she says, confused.

The king sighs, as if disappointed. "Request denied."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Nerin escorts Serena directly to Kai, who then shuffles Serena out of the Great Hall, without giving her a chance to ask the king any more questions. There is no need to push anyone in the crowd aside, they are edging away from Serena's trident already.

"No Murphy this time?" Serena asks.

"Nope," he says.

"Where are we going?"

"To train with your newest weapon." He slows as they wade into an entrance pool leading to the open ocean. "Speaking of," he turns to look at her. She is so close she almost takes a step back. "Where is your bow and arrow set?"

"I left them in The Dry," Serena suddenly can't look him in the eye. "But they are safe—surrounded by wolfsbane. And Liam would never—"

Kai interrupts by lifting her chin so she is forced to meet his eyes.

Warmth floods her lower belly. She puts her hand to her abdomen, but can't tear her eyes away from Kai. "Hmm?" she asks.

"Don't get too close to him, okay?"

The moment passes, and all of the heat that flooded Serena's system drifts away, leaving only cold in its wake.

"I know what I'm doing out there, Kai."

"I know." He steps back, dropping his hand to polish a spot on her trident with the pad of his thumb. "I mean don't get too attached."

Serena furrows her eyebrows. "He is the only friend I have out there right now. And I trust him."

Kai considers her for a moment, then nods. "Come on, let's get to those archives so we can continue to not stick holes in all those books." The playful look is back on his face.

"Can't wait." Serena dives in after Kai.

Once they are booted, robed, and in the archives, Kai motions to her trident. "Let's get started. Show me what you know."

Serena looks at her new gift, testing its weight in her hands. It is much lighter than the training tridents. Rotating the weapon as she switches

hands, the prongs make wide loops in the air.

Finally, Serena takes aim and throws. The trident sails through the air, prongs first. Shooting straight through a group of training dummies that have been set up, it sticks into a wall. The entire stem quivers at the impact.

"You missed," says Kai.

Hardly," she says, walking to the trident and pulling it out of the wall. The three holes left behind underscore a plaque that reads, 'Restricted'.

"Tell me what you know about the King's Library," she says.

"Why would you think I know something?"

"I'm assuming you know more than me, since you've been in there and I haven't."

Kai crosses the floor to the wall, brushing past Serena. He is shorter than both Murphy and Ervin, but still a head taller than Serena. He isn't very wide, either, but he is quick. His fingertips touch one of the holes.

He clicks his tongue, looking at Serena. "Mariam will not be happy."

Serena turns away from his gaze. "I'm sure Mariam isn't happy about any of this." Walking toward the dummy, Serena wraps her arm around the shoulders. "Then again, there are more occupants in the archives than she's had in a long time."

Kai laughs. One of his feet lifts up and moves back, toeing the line between the forbidden restricted section and the rest of the archives. There is no door; not even here.

Is he teasing me? Or…Serena's gaze travels up his foot to his ankle and calf. The robe is hiked up a bit.

Before her cheeks have a chance to flush, she clears her throat. "Are you going in now? I mean, you still need permission, right? Even Mariam needs permission."

His laugh has melted into a sly smile. "I have managed to get permission from the king in the past, for other reasons than my guard rounds." He brings his toe away.

"How?" she asks, a frustrated lump forming in her throat.

Kai doesn't answer. Instead, he walks toward Serena holding out his hand. "May I?"

Her empty hand twitches by her side, ready to submit. Just in time she realizes he wants her trident. She hands it over, biting her lip.

"You shouldn't give your weapon up so easily," Kai says, raising an eyebrow. He turns his attention to the trident, running his fingers down the middle prong and over the twisted double stem. His hand moves back, touching the weld where the crescent-moon shape holds the prongs. "I think this section was my trident. It was condensed down—it has to be the strongest part."

"How did you get permission to visit the king's library?" Serena asks again. She feels awkward, too aware of herself. "And why did you want it in the first place?"

"Because," he looks at her, the smile gone from his face, but not his eyes, "I wanted to be Werewolf Liaison." He turns, takes quick aim at the dummy, and throws. The trident flies through the neck, ripping the lifeless head clean off.

Serena gasps. "Be careful!" she says. "You almost hit the coral encyclopedias!"

She retrieves the trident, which is wedged in the side of a table. She pulls it loose, almost tripping over the dummy head in the process.

Still standing in place, the grin is back on Kai's face.

Serena bends to pick up the head.

"Leave it," says Kai. "Mariam will think you did it, and maybe word will spread. Perception is a powerful thing."

Serena straightens, sighing. "Not if Society already has their own opinions of me."

"I think the tide is turning…" he trails off, an eyebrow raised at Serena. "Anyway, the king let me study up on werewolf history, or more importantly, Undine history with them."

"Then what?" asks Serena.

"Then he simply said no. I was to remain with the guard."

"And you were okay with that?" Serena walks closer to him.

"Not at first, but he's the king, ya know?" Kai says.

"Yeah." Serena snorts. "I know."

"Besides," says Kai. "That was when he made me Murphy's second. Said I had the initiative no one else had shown. After that, I was always too busy to dwell on it. In fact, I hadn't really thought more about it until the night of your Choosing."

Kai has mastered the art of hiding expressions as well as any of the King's Guard. Serena can't tell if he's jealous of her job, intrigued, or

outright supportive.

"What did you learn?" Serena gestures to the King's Library, changing the course of the conversation.

"Nothing I can repeat."

Serena puts her hands to her temples.

"But I should tell you," Kai continues, "that you definitely need to get in there. You won't be able to do your job properly otherwise."

Serena rolls her eyes. "Now you are starting to sound like Nerin." She studies the darkened entryway that leads to the forbidden books, tapping her foot. "Why won't the king give me permission, then?"

"Because you aren't answering the question correctly." Kai leans in, his voice almost at a whisper. "When he asks why you want access."

Chills prickle her neck where his breath touches.

"What is the right answer?" Serena whispers back.

"I can give you many things, Serena Moon-Shadow," he steps back, placing a hand on her shoulder. "But not that. The reasons are your own."

"Fine—then give me another answer, Kai." She looks up at him from under her long lashes.

He waits.

"What deadline was the king talking about tonight with the wolf?"

Kai's hand drops from her shoulder. "You heard?"

Serena nods her head, crossing her arms.

"Because you weren't supposed to hear that," he says.

She crosses her arms, staring him down.

Kai sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. "During the Maiden's Massacre, the king made some sort of agreement with the wolves."

"Why?" asks Serena.

"I don't know the specifics," says Kai. "But once the bargain is upheld, the wolves will let the Undine mate again. That is what the deadline is all about."

"When is the deadline?"

Kai shrugs. "Soon, Serena—which is why we are all on edge."

Serena doesn't have time to dwell on what it means. Kai switches moods faster than a mackerel.

"That is enough talk," he says. "Back to training. I'm going to show you how useful the stem can be as a weapon." Kai reaches for the trident again.

Serena switches hands, holding it out of his reach.

Kai smiles. "See? Learning already."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"You got a new trident," Liam remarks. "It’s smaller."

"It’s stronger," replies Serena.

They stand at her tree—both are on the ground, one inside the yellow flowers and one outside.

Serena has already retrieved her bow and arrow set, which remained untouched.

Liam nods to the trident. "You know how to use it?"

Serena spins it once in her hand. "I'm learning."

She spent the better half from one high tide to the next training with Kai. By the time they were through, they were both breathing hard, sweaty, and exhausted—just in time for Serena to make it to The Dry to scout for traps and fix her wolfsbane protection before Liam's appearance.

Up above, two squirrels scamper across the canopy, causing dead leaves to flutter down as the sky makes the transition from dark to light.

Serena moves into position, balancing the trident in the palm of her hand and holding it steady just above her shoulder. She leans back, then twists forward and releases. The trident sails through the sky. It catches a leaf mid-air, spearing it through the center and pinning it to a dead tree.

Before the trident stops quivering, Serena runs to retrieve it. She pulls, applying pressure at the most effective angle like Kai taught her. The weapon pops loose.

Serena looks at Liam.

"You're a fast study," he says.

Serena starts to smile, until she realizes how far out of the wolfsbane circle she has come. Gripping her trident tight, she moves toward it, giving Liam a wide berth.

He stands stark still, watching her the whole way. "You still don't trust me?" he says once she is back in her field of fatal flowers. "Even after last night?"

"A girl can still be cautious, can't she?"

He grunts. "Okay, Serena Moon-Shadow. What do I have to do to prove myself to you?"

"For starters, you can tell me about your capes."

He frowns. "Why are the capes so important to you?"

"It wasn't," she shrugs, "until you refused to answer the question."

"Well, where do you think I keep the cape?" he asks.

Serena toys with a tip of her trident. "I think it is your wolf skin, and you wouldn't be able to transform without it."

Liam throws his head back in laughter. "What, like a selkie?" His laugh moves into deep guffaws, and for a moment, Serena thinks he is choking.

She crosses her arms, surprised he has even heard of the mythical creature. Seals that can transform into humans and back again, as long as they have their pelts, have been the center of many Undine calfling stories.

Finally, Liam's laughter dies down to a snicker. He unties the string at his neck, then those down his body that hold the cape closed. "You need to get your head out of The Deep, Werewolf Liaison."

"What are you—" Serena cuts her own sentence off with a gasp. She turns her back, just as the cape goes sailing over her head. It settles into a pile of material amidst the flowers. "Liam?"

"Just turn around, Serena." There is still a twinge of laughter in his voice.

"No."

"Do it, and you'll get your answer." There is a shuffle of feet.

Serena sees movement out of the corner of her eye, and turns away again. "No way. And this doesn't count as answering your question."

"Oh, come on."

Refusing to play, she holds her hands up on either side of her eyes, shielding herself from the sight of his nude Ungainly body. *How would I ever report this progression to the king? Is it even progression?*

Suddenly, the forest goes quiet.

"Liam?"

There is no answer.

"Hey, wolf-boy!" she yells out, dropping her hands to her sides.

Only the crickets respond, their chirping as steady as the tide. She turns, gritting her teeth, ready to shout his name again. Instead, she meets his steady gaze. And he is fully clothed.

"You jerk!"

He laughs again. He is doing that entirely too much tonight. She kicks out and a plume of yellow flowers puff out toward him. A sharp sting from

the flowers pierces her toe.

"Hey now." He puts his hands out, jumping back in case any of them should make it that far. "That was not cool."

"Why are you dressed tonight?" Serena puts her hand on her hip, hoping he hasn't noticed she is sticking her toe into the dirt—her feet aren't scaled and she worries she might have touched the poisonous center of the flower.

"I came straight from work, didn't have time to romp around as a wolf. But I thought I'd put on the cape anyway—you know, to keep up appearances." Liam keeps his gaze level with hers. "We hide capes throughout the forest. Any wolf is free to use them when needed; transformation can rip our clothes to shreds."

Serena picks up the discarded cape with the end of her trident. She brings it close to her nose and sniffs. It is covered in wolf scent. Recoiling, she thrusts the cape away from her. It dangles from the ends of her trident. A peace offering.

He shakes his head. "Can't take it now. It’s covered in wolfsbane."

"A souvenir for me, then." She retracts it, then folds and drapes it over the quiver on her back, careful not to impede a quick withdrawal of arrows, if need be.

"Now it is your turn for an answer," Liam says. "Are Undine immune to wolfsbane?"

Serena freezes, her toes still web-deep in the dirt. She clears her throat, retracting her foot from the ground.

I suppose a little truth won't hurt.

"A touch of its nectar will not turn us hairy," Serena tells Liam. "But it can be harmful, especially if ingested, or if the nectar makes its way into our bloodstream. The Undine tend to be more sensitive to herbs and flowers than Ungainly." Her eyes shoot to Liam—she should not have said that much.

Maybe I shouldn't have said any of it.

He holds up his hands. "Information I will keep to myself."

He winks at her and she narrows her eyes.

"At least we’re finally communicating. You ask me another question," Liam says.

"What did you find out about the conversation we overheard last night?"

"Oh," he says. "And here I thought we were on a roll. I didn't find out much."

"No?"

Liam shakes his head. "Alaric and I haven't been seein' eye to eye lately. He isn't sharin' his plans with anyone, and I couldn't exactly tell him what I saw."

"Why not?" asks Serena.

"I'm not supposed to be out here, at least not unless I am on patrol."

"But you do it anyway?" Serena smiles.

"Something like that," Liam smiles back. "It's why I come out after my shift at the bowlin' alley ends. The rest of the patrollers have usually grown tired and gone home by then. There is no excitement anymore—you guys have been slackin'."

Serena turns her face up to the sky, the morning dawn beating against her skin and drying out her scales. "In a few days, the full moon will rise."

"So it will," says Liam, almost under his breath.

"Without Undine to call on the wolves for protection, what do you do on those nights?"

Liam laughs, but it is nervous. He scratches the back of his neck and his cheeks flush.

"What?" asks Serena.

"Well, we…we…"

Serena furrows her eyebrows. *What could be so difficult to say?*

"We mate."

Serena's mouth drops open, then snaps shut. "Oh."

"What?" says Liam. "It is the same thing you are doin'."

Serena shakes her head. "Not me."

"Your kind, anyway."

Serena folds one arm across her midsection. "Why on the nights of the full moon? Can't you do it anytime? I mean, you have all the… "

"Parts?" Liam offers.

"Yes," Serena snaps back. "You have all the parts needed in either form, wolf or Ungainly."

He smiles. "Yes but we can't reproduce more werewolves unless it occurs under the full moon. Any other time, only humans pop out—and Lord knows there are enough of those runnin' around."

"So, if before—when werewolves were called upon to protect Undine during the full moon— did you even have a chance to do it? I read that werewolves were bound to patrol the beaches from sun down to sun up."

"That…is one question too many," says Liam.

Serena narrows her eyes. "Other than the full moon, are there any other tricks or secrets to bearing healthy werewolves?"

"Two questions too many." Liam crosses his arms.

Serena feels her toe begin to tingle at the wolfsbane cut. She shifts her weight from one side to another. "Yeah, maybe. Look—I need to go before the sun makes fish fry out of me."

Liam frowns, finally glancing down at her foot. "Why the rush? You've been in the sun before."

Serena shrugs, turning. "Seems like I got all the answers I'm going to get out of you. So…" she trails off as she turns away, glancing over her shoulder.

"Fine." He rolls his eyes.

Serena stops and turns back around, waiting.

"We have found that there are certain…bloodlines that lend to more control over the wolf."

Serena crosses her arms. "More control?"

"For example, better success at yielding wolves instead of humans—or transforming at will, even without the full moon."

"So your bloodline is one of them?"

"It is," Liam says, rolling down the sleeves of his shirt until they touch his wrists. "And it is not somethin' I like to discuss."

Uninterested in watching him grow angry, Serena looks away. "It's funny, how desperate some of us want to spawn and have little miniatures of ourselves running around," Serena says, voice low.

"Or swimming around," says Liam, the edge leaving his voice.

"Or howling," says Serena.

They are both smiling now, but the moment grows awkward.

"There is this maiden…" Serena trails off, remembering Cordelia's nursery song.

Even if no newborns can be found,
you'll still be the sweetest calfling in town.

"What?" asks Liam.

She can't continue with the story. It almost feels like a slight to Cordelia, putting her pain out there to the very creatures that caused it. "Never mind." Serena crosses her arms, glancing to the sky again.

Liam sighs. "Look, the night of the full moon for werewolves—if that's what you want to know—is…busy. We no longer spend it chasing mermaids back into the water, especially since you all seem to have given up on it. We have just a few on patrol, that can send out an alarm if need be."

"So if we wanted to…" Serena trails off, unsure of how to put the question in words.

"I still wouldn't risk it," Liam grinds the toe of his boot into the ground, making a small divot in the dirt. He glances up at Serena. "Unless…"

"Unless what?" she narrows her eyes.

"I could volunteer for patrol alone."

"Would that work?" Serena asks, still skeptical.

He nods his head. "Yes, I think I could make it work. Alaric brings in a bunch of—well, let's just say no one wants to miss the full moon events. Only those being punished have to patrol."

"I know how that goes," Serena mumbles. She looks at Liam. "I'm not sure—it's still too risky."

"Let me try. Let me prove that not all werewolves are bad." Liam steps forward and tentatively extends his hand to Serena. "The full moon is in three nights. Come back in two, and I'll let you know if the Undine can try it or not."

Serena stands right up against where the wolfsbane border ends. She forces herself to remain still as his hand comes closer, but her grip tightens around her trident.

His fingertips brush the scales at her shoulder. They both freeze, sucking in a breath.

"Is that okay?" he asks, his voice at a whisper.

Serena's eyes go wide. She presses her lips tight together, then nods. Her toe is now throbbing.

Liam's entire palm rests on her shoulder. It is cool relief, shielding her scales from the blazing light of the sun. He stares at her arm. The pad of his thumb traces one of the scales.

Slowly, Serena retracts it.

He pulls his hand away.

"It's okay," says Serena.

He glances at her, then puts his hand back on her shoulder. His lips part, and Serena can almost feel his breath against her face.

She retracts another scale, a little faster this time. The one after that disappears quickly. Small trickles of blood are left in the wake as each scale sinks into skin. Serena tenses, embarrassed for herself. She isn't sure why such a small amount of blood is humiliating.

Liam wipes it away with his palm. "Does it hurt?"

"Only for second," says Serena.

Finally, all of the scales along her shoulder are gone, and he is touching her, skin to skin.

"This is weird," says Liam. His hand drops to his side. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"It's fine," says Serena, taking a step back and readjusting the quiver straps on her shoulders. "I was just thinking the same thing." She turns, holding her shoulder out of his sight while she re-scales her skin.

She glances down at her toe. It is swelling. "Okay, I really have to go now."

"Yeah, yeah," says Liam, looking back into the forest. "I have…things to do, too."

"Hey," Serena calls out.

"Yeah?" Liam is quick to turn around, eyebrows up in a hopeful arch.

"Thank you for the gift, Liam of Clan Werich," Serena glances to the cape stuffed up by her quiver.

He smiles, then performs a bow worthy of the king's court. "Happy birthday, Serena Moon-Shadow, Werewolf Liaison of the Undine Kingdom."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The healer's cave is one of the closest to the Great Hall. Only Nerin's quarters separate them from the king's court. Serena pushes her way past beaded curtains, stepping inside. The cave is set on higher ground so that the tide never enters. Serena walks up a set of stairs carved into the incline. Moss that covers the stairs ceases to grow right where high tide stops.

Hailey Sage-Brush stands bent over a table, jarring dried herbs. In comparison to the drab colors of the plants in The Dry, and of the healer's cavern in general, Hailey's scales are a bright blue-green. It is exotic—the color of a tropical ocean.

The sheer amount of clutter in the cavern makes the space appear smaller, though it is five times the size of Serena's cave. There are lotions, salves, and more herbs covering every space. Thick stacks of books tower Serena. Even if the tide doesn't reach past the steps, the cave isn't nearly as damp-free as the archives, and the brittle pages of the books have long since yellowed and curled.

Deeper into the cave, a handful of assistants clean. Simone is easy to spot—her scales are some of the brightest red Society has ever seen.

"Serena…now this is a surprise," Hailey chirps. "I don't think you have ever set foot in my clinic." Hailey looks past Serena, as if she is expecting someone else. When no one appears, she stands, closing the lids on her jars at the table.

"Sit down, sit down," says Hailey. She motions to a cot set up on one side of the room and rolls a cart full of more jars to it. "Now, what seems to be the problem?"

Serena sits down, leans her trident against the cot, and crosses her arms. "It's my—"

"No, no—don't tell me. Let's see if I can guess." Hailey flutters around Serena, poking and prodding with sharp, beak-like fingers. "Short of breath?" Hailey bends Serena's neck so one side of gills are exposed. "Kelp indigestion?" Hailey pushes hard on Serena's gut.

Serena wheezes out.

"Hmm," says Hailey. "Maybe it is the breath."

"No, no," Serena stops Hailey's hands before they can bend her neck in the other direction. "It's just my toe."

"Oh," Hailey pauses, shoulders sagging. "Well, let's have a look then." She bends her knees to see. "What happened?"

"Wolfsbane," says Serena.

Hailey stands, taking a step back. "Wolfsbane?" She takes another step back, bumping into the cart of jars. "How did that happen?" Deeper into the cave, the assistants have all gone still, now straining their necks to see.

Serena furrows her eyebrows. "I'm the Werewolf Liaison."

"So?"

"So I have to protect myself somehow." Serena motions to her trident, leaning against the cot. "I use them on my weapon, and on the tree where I stay in The Dry."

Hailey's hands move back and jars clink together. "Can you just…get that thing out of here? All my patients have to sit there."

Serena sighs. Surely the swim here with the trident completely submerged in salty, cold ocean water, would have washed it clean of poison. "Listen, if you don't want me here…"

Hailey clicks her tongue. "No patient is turned away," she recites the healers motto, though it looks as though she wishes she could make an exception. She turns her head, snapping her fingers. The three assistants scurry forward. One sets a stool down in front of Serena, and Simone helps Hailey into a pair of gloves while the other approaches Serena's trident with a pair of clamps.

"Now then," Hailey begins pointing out jars with gloved fingers. "We'll need some Jimson weed, just a pinch of charcoal powder—a bit less, Simone, we don't want to kill the girl—yes that is it. And…" Hailey scans the jar labels with her eyes. "Some aloe for the burn. We'll treat the affliction inside and out," Hailey smiles down at Serena.

Serena swallows hard, staring at the charcoal being mixed in with a steaming mug of tea. The tea is passed to Hailey, who adds honey. She winks at Serena. "So it goes down easier." A quick stir, and Hailey holds out the cup.

Serena takes it, glancing from the healer to each one of her assistants. They are all watching.

"Cheers." Serena throws her head back, finishing the entire cup in one gulp.

The assistants all lean forward with wide eyes.

"Okay, you three—you've done quite enough. Back to work." Hailey shoos them away. "Sorry about that," she tells Serena, taking the cup from her. "They are a quick study when it comes to books, but have much to learn about bedside manners."

Hailey bends to study Serena's swollen toe, though she keeps her distance. "I'll just put some Aloe vera oil over the wound. We'll let it breathe tonight and tomorrow morning the swelling should be down enough to wrap it."

"Will everything go back to normal?" asks Serena.

"You've already transformed into fins and back without problem?"

"Yes," answers Serena.

"Good, good," says Hailey. She uses a sponge to apply the oil. "You'll no longer be able to grow scales there, of course."

"Wait—no scales? Do you mean, like, for the rest of my life?" Serena pulls her toe away from the oiled sponge.

"It's just on the tip of your toe, dear. Hardly something to be concerned about." Hailey stands, discarding the sponge and her gloves in a small bag, and double knotting the bag's opening.

"It is when I'm running around with wolves," Serena grumbles, getting up from the cot. "I need every bit of armor I can get."

Hailey's eyes go soft, as does her voice. "You really are doing this, aren't you?"

Serena looks at her. She wasn't aware there was ever any doubt. Serena is not a good liar.

Hailey lays a hand on Serena's shoulder, right where Liam did. It is surprisingly warm. "Scales are not the greatest defense against fangs or claws, dear."

"How do you know?" asks Serena, glancing over Hailey's bright teal scales.

Hailey shrugs. "Look at the king. I've been treating him every day since the Maiden's Massacre." Hailey lets her hand drop. "He's had a rough go of it, but he can at least swim normally now."

Hailey sits down on the old cot, and motions for Serena to do the same. "I was supposed to be selected for mating that night, too."

Serena nods. "You were in my mom's caste."

Hailey smiles, her eyes wandering to the cave floor in front of them.

"Why weren't you selected?"

Hailey looks down at her hands. There is at least two rings on each finger. She twists one of the rings around her knuckle.

"I was only an Assistant Healer at the time—you wouldn't remember the Healer. She died shortly after that massacre. A lot of Undine did in the battles that took place after the fact. Once there were hardly any males to send, the maidens—even the elderly maidens—took up arms. Anyway, I remember she kept warning me about the dangers of mating. You know—the pregnancy, the birth. And everyone knew the werewolves had been on edge about their role in our lives."

Serena looks down at her own fingers. They have plenty of scratches, but are bare of jewels.

Hailey continues, "She scared me too much. When time came for the mating selection, I avoided eye contact and made it clear I did not want to go. The male Undine left me alone." Hailey smiles, her gaze drifting off and her eyes glazing over. "It's funny, it still stung that I wasn't chosen. Even after the Maiden's Massacre. I am grateful, of course, but I've always been disappointed that I wasn't whisked off by Murphy, head of the King's Guard." Hailey looks at Serena out of the corner of her eye, and clears her throat. "A daydream common to most of us."

"Is that so?" Nerin's voice rings throughout the cluttered cave.

One of the assistants drops a bucket. It clatters across the floor. All three scramble to get it up, shushing each other as they do.

"Yes," says Hailey, standing and clearing her throat. "At least back then. Greetings, Nerin."

Nerin nods in return without a smile to her face.

Hailey flutters her hands. "Well, I must get back to my concoctions. The king needs his medicine."

"Thank you, Hailey," Serena says, shifting on the cot at the sudden tension in the room. "The king is lucky to have you."

"He is lucky to have physical wounds that can be tended to," says Hailey. She glances at Nerin. "It's the emotional suffering that is most difficult to treat."

"Indeed," agrees Nerin, her voice softening. She looks at Serena. "It takes a strong person to rule this kingdom, inside and out."

"Of course," Serena attempts to stand.

"No need to get up," Nerin crosses to the cot and sits. The heat Hailey left behind, warming Serena's side, retreats.

In a way, Serena finds the cold comforting. It reminds her of her cave, and the deeper, secluded parts of the ocean.

"You are doing well with your punishments, Serena. I don't want you to think that it goes unnoticed by the king."

Glancing at Nerin, Serena wonders how much Nerin will divulge when the king isn't by her side. "The punishments seem…harsh. I mean, I'm grateful you declined the death penalty, of course," Serena says quickly. "It's just…" Serena rubs the edge of the cot with her fingers.

"What?" Nerin snaps.

"Am I the sacrifice the wolves want?" Serena blurts out the question that has been on her mind ever since she witnessed the meeting between her king and Alaric.

Nerin sucks in a breath, staring straight ahead. "What do you know about it?"

"I saw King Merrick and Alaric talking," says Serena. "The entire guard was there. It can't be that big of a secret, except to me," she mumbles the last few words. "He was concerned about whether King Merrick would follow through on a promise he made. The deadline is apparently coming up soon."

Nerin's eyes drop to the floor, and her shoulders sag. "Yes, yes the deadline is coming. One full moon cycle, to be exact." Nerin looks at Serena, eyebrows raised. "Can you think of something else that will occur during the full moon after next?"

Serena purses her lips, the only future her mind is on is her next punishment.

"Some kind of big…anniversary," prods Nerin.

"Oh, the Maiden's Massacre," says Serena.

Nerin nods her head. "The anniversary of the Maiden's Massacre, and your birthday."

"Right, but I don't—" Serena cuts off, her eyes going wide. "What does it have to do with me?"

Nerin stands, folding her hands in front of her and pacing the room. "The night of the massacre, a few choices had to be made, none of which suited the Undine species, but we weren't exactly in a position to bargain,

either. When the king came ashore, you were the only infant left alive—he begged the wolves to spare you."

Serena stares at Nerin, transfixed.

Nerin stops pacing to face Serena still sitting on the cot. "The wolves agreed to let you leave with the king—on one condition." Nerin holds up her finger. "That you be returned to the pack on your eighteenth birthday."

"Why?" blanches Serena.

"I don't know. It is between the king and the wolves, and the reason has never been shared with me. Once you are delivered, the wolves say they will allow the maidens ashore again. Chasing us back to The Deep for eighteen long years is their insurance that the king will follow through with his promise."

"So will he?" Serena stands, stepping toward Nerin.

"Will he allow his own kingdom to die out just to save one girl?" Nerin arches her eyebrow at Serena.

Serena stays silent, the consequences of either decision settling hard in her stomach like an iron anchor hitting the seafloor.

Nerin's face softens, the hard lines around the corners of her lips disappear. She walks over to Serena, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I honestly don't think he knows yet."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rubbing her temples, Serena begins pacing the room. Would Society allow the Undine population to taper away, just to save one girl? Or would they willingly give Serena to the wolves? As an orphan, Serena is connected to very few.

What would Society do for me? If it were Sasha from the beloved Sunbeam family, no doubt the rest of the maidens would willingly give up their lineage for her. But maybe not for an orphan that few like—good Werewolf Liaison or no.

Still pacing, Serena glances at Nerin who stares at the ground in front of her, hands clasped together so tight they are turning white. Right now, Nerin is not the regal King's Second Serena has always known her to be.

What would she choose to do? Serena wonders. *What would I choose to do? I could take the decision out of all their hands, sacrificing myself to the wolves and allow the Undine to prosper.* Serena smiles. *I could give Cordelia her calfling.*

Swallowing hard, Serena wiggles her toes. The wolfsbane wound is bright pink now. Suddenly, Serena's head snaps up. "Nerin, what if we attempted mating again? Before the deadline? Not you and me, obviously." Serena's face goes hot with embarrassment. "I mean, just...Undine in general."

"We've tried since that night, although I suppose you wouldn't know it. The details of such practices were never taught in your classes." Nerin unclenches her hands and brushes them across her hair and back, securing a few loose strands in the bun at the nape of her neck.

Serena can remember only once when the mating and birthing cycle was discussed openly with the Temporal Caste. Evandre was invited in while Zayla took uncharacteristic leave from her front podium to the back of the caste room. For the most part, Evandre spoke of lunar rhythms in frogs, crabs, and the marine worm, and how reproductive systems react to external stimuli, the most influential being the light of the moon. The Temporal Caste followed the lecture scratching their heads and scrunching their eyebrows together. It wasn't until the very end that Evandre referred to the maiden body as being connected to the moon by blood, hormones, and soul.

After caste lessons concluded that day, Serena headed straight for the archives. There she found detailed explanations. Just as the moon creates tides on Earth, it interacts with the electromagnetic fields of a maiden's body, creating the ebb and flow of internal tides that trigger fertile physiological processes.

"Only the light of a full moon allows the fertile cycle in a maiden to emerge, as well as initiates Undine labor—which is a very stressful event for mother and child," Nerin says, continuing to unfold and refold her hands in her lap while she speaks. "We've tried traveling to other islands, but mothers, even in the early stages of labor, have had a difficult time handling the changes in the water, temperature, salinity, and acidity, among others. No child survived it, and sometimes, not even the mother. It is the same reason we cannot, or do not, migrate."

Serena moves her hair back away from her face. "Our caste lessons weren't very specific about birthing events."

Nerin nods. "We tried water births at the surface, on the ceremonial whale rock, and of course—more attempts on the beach. None of it worked. Even if werewolves weren't present, the mother was simply too stressed for a successful labor. It became evident that Undine react too strongly to emotion, such as anxiety, fear, or worry."

"Just like our sensitivity to herbs from The Dry," Serena mumbles.

Nerin's lips go tight. "Not only is the maiden's massacre still fresh in everyone's minds, but so are all the battles that occurred after."

"Not for the Temporal Caste," Serena says, her voice just a whisper. Something clicks, and Serena turns to look at Nerin, mouth open. "You've kept the details from us on purpose. You don't want us to know…."

Nerin lays a hand on Serena's arm. "The Temporal Caste is our last chance. The council voted to keep the details a secret, and the subject became taboo for the rest of Society to mention, especially to you and your caste mates. The less you know, the less there is for you to worry about."

Serena stands from the cot, crosses her arms, and begins pacing. "How long were you going to wait? Before announcing a pairing of the Temporal Caste to the King's Guard?" There isn't as much bite in Serena's voice as she intended. She stops pacing, finally understanding. "You were waiting until the king follows through with his promise by giving me to the werewolves, and they allow us to mate." Walking toward Nerin, Serena sits

down again, bouncing up Nerin’s side of the cot. "I've been told that werewolves wouldn't bother us in the next full moon—they are otherwise occupied." Serena spits it out before she can change her mind.

"And you believe it?" Nerin asks.

Serena nods, all too aware that any hesitation might cost her. "We have one more full moon before the deadline is up. If we are successful…"

Nerin stands. "Then the king won't have to relinquish our youngest maiden." It is her turn to pace the room now. "Very well." She stops, turning to Serena. "I will consult with the king. In the meantime, let Hailey finish with your wound, then Kai can take you to another training session after. I will send for him."

Nerin nods to Hailey as she takes her leave from the healer's cave.

Pushing her large, metal cart toward the cot, Hailey watches Nerin disappear down the stairs then turns back to Serena. "Well, that was awkward." She kneels in front of her Serena, pulling the damaged foot to rest on her knee. "She doesn't like it when maidens talk about Murphy, especially not in reference to mating partners."

"Why not?" asks Serena.

"Because," says Hailey. "Murphy is her son."

"I never knew that," Serena says, her mouth dropping open. She has trouble placing the large-boned Murphy in the same family as thin, uptight Nerin, and wonders what other family bonds she hasn't connected.

"All this time," Hailey clucks, "and never paired. It's a shame. But Kai shows promise for a good pairing. Not that I—"

"Can we hurry this along?" interrupts Serena.

Hailey looks up, her forehead creased in question.

"I'd rather not receive the entire kingdom sitting on this cot."

"Maidens," Kai enters the cave, taking the steps up two at a time.

"Too late," Serena mumbles.

"Must've been hanging close by," Hailey winks at Serena.

"I couldn't help but notice your trident is out of arm's reach," Kai says, sitting down on the cot beside Serena and leaning back against the wall.

"Hailey banished it to the corner," Serena gestures to her weapon. "Not supposed to touch it until it is sterilized."

"Why?" Kai asks.

"Because," Hailey shoos Kai toward the end of the cot, away from Serena, "the thing was wrapped with wolfsbane and she had already

managed to get some on herself." Hailey lifts up Serena's foot, displaying Serena's momentary lapse of judgment right in front of Kai.

Embarrassed, Serena lets her hair fall to cover her face again as Hailey begins cleaning her toe with a stringent-smelling rag.

Kai leans forward. "Could be worse, considering your occupation."

Serena shifts in her seat, trying to pull her foot back.

Hailey doesn't give, keeping a death grip on Serena's ankle. "Be still."

Kai hops up from the cot and walks to the trident. He taps his chin, studying it. "Wolfsbane, huh?" He holds out a finger toward one of the tips.

"Kai Forest!" Hailey's shrill voice causes Kai to jump back. "Don't you go poisoning yourself. I'm low on charcoal as it is."

Kai crosses his arms. "I wasn't gonna—"

"Excuse me," Simone interrupts. She stands behind him with a bucket of steaming hot water and several rags.

"Oh, by all means." He gestures with a grand swing of his arm toward the trident.

She blushes and he steps back to watch her clean the trident.

"Ow!" Serena's attention is brought back to her toe.

"Hush. The sting will go away in a moment. This salve will help to harden the skin on your toe. We don't want it to be as soft as an Ungainly belly."

Serena risks a glance at Kai, but he appears not to have heard. Simone giggles at one of his jokes while bending to clean the bottom of the trident—hardly appropriate with Kai standing right behind her.

"Oh, for Poseidon's sake, Simone!" Hailey straightens, waving a toxic rag in the air as she scolds Simone. "No need to scrub the tarnish right off the thing. That is enough—thank you."

Simone sticks out her bottom lip, pouting. It is bright red, matching her scales. She gives Kai a smile and a wave before collecting her bucket and walking away.

Serena rolls her eyes but frowns when Kai wiggles his fingers in quick succession—a flirtatious wave.

"Well, that's all I can do for now. I suppose you'll refuse to allow me to wrap it again?" Hailey asks.

Serena nods.

"It'll at least heal faster, that way," Hailey shrugs. "Come see me once every other day—and don't make me hunt you down."

Kai clears his throat, and both maidens look over at him. He gestures to the trident, asking permission to touch.

Hailey gives a flippant wave of her hand.

Not hesitating to grasp it by the stem, Kai picks it up and spins it. The pointed tips make wide arcs, flashing against the glint of candles throughout the healer's cave. Even Hailey stops to watch. To his credit, he somehow manages to avoid both floor and ceiling, not to mention the rows of jars and books that surround him.

Finally, he stops, approaching Serena. He helps her up with one hand and places her trident in her other hand.

"Wolfsbane. Smart," he says with a smile.

Right now, Serena isn't sure if she'd rather have Kai's compliment or his flirtatious wave.

"Ready for another round?" he asks.

"About as ready as I am for all the other surprises in my life," says Serena, limping after Kai.

He hesitates, looking at Serena from the corner of his eye. Then his face splits open in a wide grin and his laughter follows them down the steps. Serena hopes Simone can hear it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Even before they leave the corridors that connect the main networks of Society, Serena and Kai hear that a new mating is to take place on the next full moon. The news spreads like an oil slick—a pairing between the Temporal Caste and the King's Guard.

Serena follows Kai, well aware that they will each take part in The Selection—the actual ceremony where couples are paired. A small group of maidens huddled together grow quiet when Serena and Kai pass, but when she steals a glance, Serena can see small jewels passed amongst the group. They are actually betting on The Selection.

Serena and Kai reach the archives and dress in robes, their back to one another, saying nothing. Mariam meets them at the entrance.

"More training?" Her lips are pressed tight together.

"As you say," Kai says, slipping past her.

"Excuse me," Mariam turns, following him in. "But I very well do not say. I never agreed to it."

Kai heads for the training tridents, picking one up and testing the balance in the palm of his hand.

"I apologize, Serena dear," Mariam says.

Serena shrugs, attempting a smile—very little of what transpires these days are in her control.

Mariam turns back to Kai. "Perhaps you can train in the Great Hall, or one of the guards training rooms…"

Her voice becomes background noise as Serena steps up to the table by the catalogues, still piled with werewolf books. One lies open, to the picture of the dead maiden with the wolf standing over her. Though her first reaction is to slam the book shut, Serena forces herself to look. She brushes her fingertips over the pool of the maiden's blood, remembering her dream and remembering the decision the king will have to make.

The pages are thick with deep red.

Serena feels Mariam's hand on her shoulder and she realizes the arguing pair have long since grown quiet. The Records Keeper leans around Serena, looking down at the picture. Kai approaches on the other side.

"I need a place to train, Mariam," Serena says softly. For now, she will do all she can to protect herself from the wolves.

Mariam's hand tightens on Serena's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Serena—of course. You are welcome here anytime."

Serena nods, taking a deep breath. She turns to Kai, meeting his steady gaze. "I am ready."

He nods, turning back to the tridents.

Behind them, Mariam begins to close the book.

"Leave it," says Serena.

Mariam pauses, looking up at her.

"It is a good reminder," Serena explains.

Mariam opens her mouth, as if she is about to say something, but then thinks better of it and moves to the catalogues to keep busy.

The training session is rough, and growing more so by the moment. They seem to be feeding off each other's intensity. Each time it grows to be too hard, Serena puts her hand to her shoulder, right where Liam's hand rested. She doesn't know if it is to remind her there are worse things out there, or better. Either way, she can't stop doing it.

After several hours of physical work, Kai tries teaching Serena how to come out of a roll with a wolf. Each time, she manages to get her feet tucked in, placing them right at his abdomen for the kick.

"Higher up on my chest," Kai instructs, picking himself up off the ground, trying to catch the breath Serena knocked out of him. "Otherwise fangs can still reach you."

Serena nods. "Again."

Kai lunges into her and they both go to the ground, rolling. This time, she manages to do it right.

"Good," says Kai, breathing hard.

Serena pushes herself to her feet. Her legs are trembling with exhaustion, so she leans against the cave wall for support. "Again," she says.

Kai picks himself up too, shaking his head. "No—the session is over. You need rest for The Selection tonight."

Serena almost snorts. "The Selection? I stand in line—how hard could that be?" She asks this despite the fact she is having trouble standing right now.

"I wasn't referring the actual ceremony, I was referring to after."

"Oh," Serena's cheeks go hot. She is trying not to think about what will happen after, if she is selected.

She looks over at Kai. His robe has become somewhat dislodged at his chest and the smooth skin underneath gleams with sweat. Green eyes under thick brows stare back at her. Serena bites her lip. Though most of the middle-aged maidens might look to Murphy as the prime matching partner, Serena knows the eyes of the Temporal Caste are all on Kai.

Soon, Kai will be on the beach with another maiden. Serena has trouble imaging the moment as magical. More than likely, they will be staring at the forest line, watching for werewolves, rather than getting lost in each other's eyes. They are going to need protection.

"No rest," says Serena, pushing herself away from the wall. "I need to go to The Dry."

Kai's eyes snap to hers. "Okay," he says. "I'll escort you."

Serena recalls what happened with Ervin. "I don't think that is a good idea."

He crosses his arms, staring her down.

Mariam has disappeared among the shelves. The silence in the archives becomes apparent, as if the books themselves are holding their breath.

Finally, the corners of Kai's mouth turn up in a smile. "I'm not sure the Werewolf Liaison has the authority to dictate where the King's Guard does and doesn't go." He straightens his robe, untying and retying the sash that holds it closed. "So if I happen to be in The Dry the same time and place as you, you can't stop me."

Resigning, Serena looks at the floor. "Fine—but can you at least wait in the breakers?"

He nods. "I'll stay until you call for me."

* * *

When Kai and Serena reach the surface, the sun hasn't gone down and the beach is well lit. She hasn't often scouted during the day, not unless she needed to procure an instrument or material from a wandering Ungainly. Poking her head above the surface far enough out so she won't be spotted, Serena observes the beach. Kai does the same beside her as they wait while one couple finishes their picnic. Serena keeps turning around to

check the position of the sun. She can already feel the pull of the moon, anxious for its counterpart to relinquish the sky.

The couple on the beach kiss, and Serena is suddenly aware of how close Kai treads water next to her. She no longer looks behind her at the sun, not wanting to risk locking eyes with Kai. She stares straight ahead at the couple on the beach. The male's hands are curious, snaking up the female’s shirt, and moving down her thighs. She pushes them away, giggling. It reminds Serena of Simone's laughter when she is with Kai. Her fists tighten because one night from now, it might be Kai and Simone on the beach. Except Simone won't be wearing a shirt.

Serena dips below water, cooling off. She doesn't know if she is warm from embarrassment or anger. Maybe both. Her hair glows. She waits until she has her bioluminescence under control, then reemerges. Kai glances at her but doesn't say anything.

The couple is packing up. They leave shortly after, arms wrapped around one another's waist. Even they know this forest is not friendly after dark. Serena puts her hand to her shoulder, turning to Kai. She doesn't speak, but her raised eyebrow says it all—*stay*. She raises her other eyebrow, so they are both arched as high as they can go. *Please?*

He nods.

Serena turns to the seagulls above who move in to scour the deserted beach. Serena can finally go forward. She swims under the shadow of the gulls. Their movement is predictable, zigzagging toward shore, closer and closer, ensuring the coast is clear. If there are any Ungainly eyes still watching the seas, they won't be able to discern Serena's darkened form just under the water from the seagull's long shadow.

Serena rides the next wave in, allowing her face and arms to brush the air. Her legs transform, and she brings just enough scales on her body to mimic an Ungainly bikini. It is enough so she looks the part of this world, unless someone gets close enough to see her webbed feet, or the gills at her neck. The heat of the sun disappears from her back.

Time to get to work. She enters the tree line, calling forth scales to cover her body as she does. Her first stop is her tree, where she can collect strands of wolfsbane flowers already strung together.

Once there, Serena pulls a braided rope from the tree, coiling it into tight circles. Before she can place it in her basket, Serena notices a small

slip of paper tucked into the bottom weaves of wicker. She drops the wolfsbane and pulls out the note, unfolding it.

The scrawl is messy and tilts heavily to the right.

The beaches are yours.

A small, wolfsbane flower is drawn below. Serena smiles. A peace offering—Liam's way of letting Serena know it will be safe.

She tucks the note back into the basket and throws the wolfsbane rope over it. The beaches will be clear the night of the full moon. The Undine have a chance, thanks to Liam.

Serena spends the first half of the night preparing Forest Beach for the upcoming event, working to build a barrier between Undine and the rest of The Dry. Serena pauses multiple times to glance at the breakers, wondering if Kai still watches her, or if a group of maidens has come along to steal him away.

Back and forth she trudges, from her tree to the wolfsbane flower patch, and back to the beach. A lacy veil of poison flowers forms, hanging just beyond the tree line, enough that hopefully any Ungainlies on the beach won't notice.

As soon as it is finished, Serena says her goodbyes to the moon and returns to the water where Kai still waits for her. She approaches, exhausted and ready for sleep.

"Are you okay?" asks Kai.

Serena turns to look at the beach. "I'm tired," she admits.

They bob in the water, pushed back and forth by the waves.

"The Undine thank you for your protection," Kai whispers.

He says it so low, Serena scoots in closer, looking at him.

"Thank you," she whispers back.

Kai turns to her. "Do you know how much it kills me to have to stay here while you risk your life in The Dry?"

Is he jealous? "It's just my job," she says, nose scrunched up.

He smiles. "Meanwhile the King's Guard is relegated to waiting in the breakers."

"Kai," Serena lets herself drift even closer to him. A mischievous smile spreads across her face. "You did a really good job of waiting, tonight."

With her attempt at lightening the mood, Serena expects another playful smile from him, but it does not come. Instead, he closes the rest of the distance between them. "Some things are worth waiting for."

Serena bites her lip.

He moves even closer. "*You* are worth waiting for."

Under the surface, their hands bump together. Intertwining his fingers with hers, he brings their interlocked hands above the water.

Though surprised at the intimate contact, Serena's slender fingers fall into place between each of his, with his palm wrapped protectively around her knuckles.

Serena looks back into his eyes. They are swirls of deep green and pinpoints of gold, fringed with dark lashes. He lowers himself the short distance necessary so they are face to face. He leans in, lips parting.

Serena tenses, finally understanding what is happening.

No, yes, no, yes, no.

"Wait," she says, pulling her hand out of his and placing it on his chest, a buffer between their bodies.

This is happening too fast. He is too old for me.

Serena bites her lip. "I'm sorry." She looks down, preferring the safe, murky depths of the ocean to the wild in his eyes.

Raising his fingertips to just under her chin, Kai tilts her face up so she is forced to look at him. "Don't look down, Serena. It's okay if you are not ready. I will wait for you until my last breath."

Her lips part as he runs the pad of his thumb the length of her cheek.

Serena wants to respond. She feels she must. Just as she opens her mouth, a buzzing from below interrupts. Her lips press tight together as she watches Kai dip one ear in the water to listen. He sighs, then straightens.

"The king's call," he says. "Time for The Selection."

Chapter Thirty

After Kai, Serena is one of the last to enter the Great Hall. She tries slipping to her old place in the back where she is shadowed by the overhanging cliff, but Nerin doesn’t let that happen and motions Serena to her side. Serena hesitates.

Nerin glares, then starts to bend down to the king, as if she will have him call Serena out.

Serena sighs, then steps forward. This time, she has to push her way through the crowd. They are not expecting her.

She hears confused whispers. "Will the final punishment come today?"

Once she reaches the mid-platform, Serena offers a curtsey to the king, then looks at Nerin for further instruction. Nerin nods, allowing her to step up to the high platform. There are more confused whispers.

Serena takes her place beside Nerin, much closer to the king than they were before.

"Serena Moon-Shadow stands with king and council as holder of the title Werewolf Liaison," the king's voice booms throughout the Great Hall. It puts a stop to the whispers. "After consulting with my council, as you all know, we have decided to hold a pairing—the first in thousands of moons."

A jitter of bioluminescent lights and Undine popping up on their tiptoes runs through the crowd. Even the council, who now stand in front of the table of evidence instead of behind it, shift on their feet.

"Our Werewolf Liaison," the king gestures to Serena, "has deemed it safe. As such," the king continues. "She will take part in The Selection."

All eyes rest on Serena. Stiffening, she sucks in a sharp breath. She works to keep her face smooth, but her lips, pressed tight together, twitch.

"Go take your place," whispers Nerin. She puts her hand in the small of Serena's back, nudging Serena forward. The simultaneous pat is probably supposed to offer reassurance.

When Serena steps down to the mid-platform, she turns to curtsey. It is far less grand than when she first came in. She glares at the king, but keeps it short.

"Those that will accompany her are…" the king pauses. Serena can almost see him counting to three under his breath. "The remainder of the Temporal Caste."

There is a series of murmurs from the crowd, along with some shocked gasps, which filter away into disappointed whines. Aside from the Temporal Caste, they all knew this was coming—they've known for years now. Apparently, it all came too soon anyway.

No one moves forward, so the king begins calling them by name.

"Sasha Sunbeam."

More whispers. There was nothing when Serena's name was called.

"Simone Rosebush."

Serena risks a glance at Hailey, standing next to Zayla, shades of intense gold and dark teal running down their scales. Serena did not think about the effect this would have on Zayla, watching all of her students take such a risk. Or is she happy for them?

The final few Temporal Caste mates are called. Cordelia is the last. She takes her place at the end of the line. They stand before all of Society, just as they did a week ago during The Choosing.

"Murphy?' calls the king.

Murphy, standing with the rest of the King's Guard across from the council, calls the guard to attention. He gives leave to Ervin, the youngest member of the King's Guard.

Ervin steps forward. He moves toward one end of the line. He passes each Undine in the Temporal Caste, taking his time. Serena can't look, and when Ervin moves in front of her, her eyes shoot to the ground. He doesn't pause long before moving on. Heat creeps up her cheeks, and her ears ring.

Finally, at the end of the line, Ervin stops and extends his hand. The rest of the Undine in line lean out to see who he has chosen. Serena does not; she already knows. Cordelia.

Out of the corner of her eye, Serena can see Cordelia's hand move to join Ervin's, her bracelets clinking together. The union is accepted by both parties. They will mate tonight.

A noticeable hum of disappointment emanates from the guard. Murphy shoots his men a look, admonishing them.

Better be careful, thinks Serena. *Or they'll get buzzed.*

The next guard member steps forward, and makes his way down the line. He takes even longer than Ervin did. Of course, the decision is more

difficult now. Cordelia was the prize catch. He passes Serena, and she shifts from one foot to another, refusing to meet his gaze. Just as Ervin did, he moves on.

Is this the way they used to do it? wonders Serena. *It is absolute torture. I'd rather be stoking fires in the armory.* Her thoughts move to how Ronan and Rayne were matched and her cheeks grow hot again as she tries to keep from delving further into the relationship of her mother and father figures.

The guard member has made a choice. It is the new Scientist Assistant, Evandre's apprentice. Serena busies herself with retracting and bringing forth scales along her arms. Five more members of the King's Guard walk by. Scales in, scales out. It is the same routine Serena used to pass time when she finished with a test or a project before the rest of her caste.

Finally, it is Kai's turn. He falls almost directly in the middle of the guard, as far as age goes. It is odd he is Murphy's second, with several guard members as his elders. Six; the number comes to her. He is six castes ahead of her.

Maybe he isn't too old for me. What would it matter anyway, once we reach Ronan and Rayne's ages?

Serena is distracted by his footsteps toward the Temporal Caste. He moves faster than the others did, passing the first few Undine maidens without hesitation. Serena is still looking down when Kai's feet reach her own.

He has stopped directly in front of her.

Serena's breath catches in her throat as his hand extends out.

No, yes, no, yes, no. The alternating words race through her mind.

But his hand does not stop. It moves up, touching the bottom of her chin, forcing it higher.

"Do not look down, Serena."

She meets Kai's eyes. The rest of the words of his sentence come to her, though they remain unspoken. *I will wait for you until my last breath.*

Kai winks at her, then moves on. Serena lets out her own breath. She is sure this time it is a mix of disappointment *and* relief.

Two maidens down from Serena, Kai stops. Simone. She accepts, her face breaking open into a wide smile.

Serena's mouth drops open. When Simone glances at Serena, the corners of Simone's lips pull up even farther. Snapping her mouth shut,

Serena glares at Simone, then at Kai.

It won't happen, she tells herself. *He will wait for me.*

Several more guard members make their pick, all passing Serena, until only Murphy is left.

"Murphy Air-Spirit," the king calls the Head of the Guard to his throne. Murphy obliges, bowing before he ascends the steps to the throne. Murphy and Nerin bend their heads toward the King in discussion. Looking at the pair stand together, Serena can now spot subtle similarities between Nerin and her son—slightly hooked noses and high cheekbones. Her eyes falls to the king. *Maybe he mated with Nerin even before his wife died? Is Murphy his son?* But no, the king's face is much too square. Serena squints. *Is that a birthmark on his cheek?*

The three maidens left standing in line with Serena, including orange-colored Sasha, and they all fidget as the discussion grows heated. Nerin's hushed words are clipped and her hand gestures are aggressive in an uncharacteristic display of disagreement with the king.

Finally, the conversation ends. Murphy descends the stairs, his steps echoing in the silent cavern. Somewhere behind her, Serena can hear a maiden suck in her breath. Perhaps some of them are still under the illusion Murphy will pull them out of the crowd and whisk them away to The Pairing.

His hulking form draws closer and closer to the four remaining maidens. Beside her, Serena is aware that the others have ducked their heads, staring at the ground.

But her gaze remains on Nerin, who is glaring at Serena with narrowed eyes. Confusion freezes Serena in place, until Murphy's wide-shoulders replace Nerin's glowering scrutiny. Standing directly in front of Serena, he extends his hand. Serena's mouth drops open. Heat blazes up her neck, licking at her cheeks and drying out her mouth. She can't speak. Her eyes dart from Murphy to the king on his throne then toward Kai. Kai's face is blurred as grey creeps in from the corners of her vision. All Serena can see his hand, fingers intertwined with Simone's.

Focusing in on the pang of jealousy in her chest, Serena finds the strength to reach out and accept Murphy's hand. The union is accepted by both parties, and Serena feels sick to her stomach.

Chapter Thirty-One

The matched couples separate, each party expected to get sufficient rest before the event. Serena waits at the front of the Great Hall, allowing most of Society to leave with high tide before she does.

She wants to approach the king and speak to him directly regarding his decision about the sacrifice he has to make, but Nerin and Murphy stand on either side of him, their heads bent down and each speaking in lowered whispers.

"Kai Forest," the king's voice booms out.

Kai's head snaps up and the king beckons him to join the group at the throne. Taking his leave from Simone, Kai dips his head slightly toward her. That bottom red lips sticks out before she turns to head to her own cave.

As Kai passes Serena, on his way to the throne, he pauses. Turning toward her, he begins to speak. "Serena…I—"

"Kai!" Murphy hisses, annoyed at the delay in responding to the king's request.

Kai's shoulders sag. He glances one last time at Serena, then turns to approach the throne.

Serena turns herself, she can't watch him anymore. He is gone—paired with another. Apparently his ability to wait isn't too well honed.

Dragging herself from the Great Hall, Serena takes the long way to the orphanage, passing most of the residential caves as she goes—many of which she has never even seen before. Those belonging to the Temporal Caste that were chosen in The Selection are inundated with well-wishers, visitors with advice, and even those bearing their condolences, as if another Maiden's Massacre has already occurred.

The Swallow-Tail family cavern is especially full of Undine. With Cordelia chosen for the pairing, everyone wants to make an appearance there. As Serena passes by the opening, she glances in. Her eyes scan past the myriad of colorful maidens, searching for Cordelia's telltale burgundy. Finally, Serena spots her, sitting in a corner with Ervin. Their shoulders touch in the small space they have. Ervin leans into Cordelia, whispering

something. Cordelia laughs. Her fingers brush his, and they both pause, looking down.

Faces start to look out from the room at Serena, so she moves on.

Although most of these caves are much larger than Serena's, they are packed with not only Undine, but with bins of food, shelves of tiny figurines and even a cage or jar with pets from The Deep. There are paintings and carvings etched into walls adorned with bright colors. One cave has a large assortment of musical instruments, and the Sunbeam cave even has a rug sprawled across the floor. The waters don't reach this high up in the mountain.

Compared to these, her own cavern is bleak, homely, and isolated. Just like Serena herself. She doesn't belong to this Society and she doesn't belong to Kai; she never did.

Maybe the wolves are a better choice after all, no matter what they intend to do with me.

Making her way to the orphanage, Serena retreats to the nanny's sleeping cove. Rayne is off studying up on recipes appropriate for pregnant Undine, and Serena hasn't seen Ronan in many moons. She assumes he is busy making replacement tridents for Murphy, Kai, and Ervin.

A few hours of sleep, and Rayne is shaking Serena's shoulder. "It's time, Serenita."

Serena stretches, then lifts herself to a sitting position in the cove.

Rayne watches her, smiling. "You are practically a grown maiden now. I suppose I ought to stop calling you that."

Shaking her head, Serena smiles back at Rayne. "Not yet, Mother Rayne." Serena hops down, taking Rayne's arm. "Do you want to escort me to the beach?"

"Of course," says Rayne, running her fingertips through Serena's hair. "Right after you eat something."

"Of course," mumbles Serena.

The meal passes with only a few arguments over the amount of food on Serena's plate, and before long, she is giving Rayne a quick hug. Serena swims in between a line of maidens, waiting just under the surface with bows and arrows should the pairing couples need help.

Serena is the last to arrive on the beach. Behind her, the nickel-shaded moon is full and large, dominating the entire sky. It pulls Serena from the

ocean, water cascading down her scales as she sheds herself of the salty sea.

The matched couples are there, along with Murphy in front of them, all staring into the tree line. The only one to turn and watch as Serena emerges from the water is Kai, but she can't bear to return the glance. Simone is hanging on his arm like a suckerfish. Serena keeps her eyes on Murphy, until she takes her place beside him.

Serena looks behind her at Cordelia and Ervin. Cordelia's hands tremble, and she hides behind Ervin's back. At least this time, she has left all her jewelry behind. Nothing rattles.

Ervin wears a deep frown.

Serena's lips turn down, matching his. How is he supposed to proceed, with his partner scared out of her mind?

Leaving Murphy's side, Serena steps into the forest to retrieve something then comes back to Ervin and Cordelia. Serena no longer sees the most popular caste member, or the spoiled beauty. She doesn't even see the girl who is about to pair with Serena's best friend. Right now she sees the maiden who swaddled and rocked a doll like an Undine calfling. At this moment, Serena sees her species only chance for survival.

Serena extends her hand toward Cordelia. Ervin steps aside, raising his eyebrow. Serena swallows, and gives a friendly smile.

Cordelia glances once at Ervin, then toward the dark cliffs that loom on one side of the beach, and finally moves to Serena. The maidens lock hands, and Serena pulls Cordelia closer to the cliffs.

"The night of The Choosing, right after I was named Werewolf Liaison, I was sent out there on my own." Serena nods to the forest. "I saw a wolf, the very next night. And then twice after."

Cordelia's hand squeezes Serena’s. "Did he try to kill you?"

Serena looks at Cordelia. She wants—she needs Cordelia to see the truth in her eyes. "No."

"Why not?" Cordelia asks.

Serena thinks of her jellyfish tree and smiles. "Because I brought something with me."

"Your trident?' Cordelia makes a pointed glance at Ervin's empty hand.

"No." Serena shakes her head. "I brought a little something from home, and…" Serena holds up a yellow flower, "this."

"Wolfsbane?" Cordelia steps back, throwing her hands up in front of her face.

Serena rolls her eyes, shooing Ervin as he steps forward. "It won't hurt you if you hold it at the stem."

Cordelia edges back, keeping her eyes on the flower.

"Go on, take it," encourages Serena.

Finally, Cordelia reaches out. Her hand is even shakier than before.

"I decorated an entire tree, and the ground around it with these. Sort of like a circle of protection."

Cordelia's bright blue eyes go wide as Serena speaks.

"The wolf would patrol the border, but has never crossed into the flowers."

Serena watches scales emerge along Cordelia's arm, then fingers, as she plucks the stem from Serena's hand.

Cordelia twirls it, as Serena does when studying the magical flower. The yellow petals are highlighted against Cordelia's deep burgundy scales.

"So this will protect me? If I hold this tiny little thing, I won't be killed?" she asks.

"Not exactly," says Serena. "But I've been busy. Look." Serena points into the darkened forest.

Cordelia steps forward, squinting. The rest of the Undine, Temporal Caste and guards alike, look too. They've been following the conversation, closer than Serena realized.

"I don't see anything," says Cordelia, whispering now.

"Keep looking," Serena addresses everybody. "Your eyes will adjust in a moment."

There are a few seconds of quiet, with crickets chirping in front of them and waves crashing behind them. The wind picks up, blowing out of the forest, toward the Undine maidens. A braided rope of yellow swings out. When it falls back among the trees, its color brings attention to all of the other hanging ropes and the line of flowers on the ground.

Cordelia breathes. "Oh."

"It follows the entire tree line to the cliffs and then north, where the ocean meets the forest."

All at once, Cordelia has stopped shaking. Her hand goes to her midsection, and she licks her lips. "It will hold them all back?"

"I think so," says Serena. But tonight is a full moon—a night where anything goes.

"Okay," says Cordelia. She looks at Ervin, holding out her hand. "Okay," she says again.

Cordelia buries the stem into the ground, so the rest of the wolfsbane flower stands straight up. The pair join hands, their eyes locked.

Suddenly the odd one out again, Serena turns away, heat creeping up her cheeks. A low murmur drifts out from the rest of the Undine.

"Thank you," Cordelia's voice cuts through the whispers.

Serena turns.

"Just for…everything." Cordelia finishes, her hand going to her stomach again.

The thanks comes too soon—the night has just begun. Serena nods, nonetheless, and turns back to the forest. Murphy steps up to her side.

"Ready?" he asks.

Serena smiles. This isn't her first trip to The Dry. "Are you?"

Murphy looks down, holding up his empty hand. "Here," he says. With that hand, the one that usually holds the trident, he reaches for her own hand and clasps them together.

Serena stiffens. "Murphy—I can't do this."

"We most definitely will not be doing anything but patrolling."

Serena whips her head around to Murphy. "What?"

"But let them see us walking into the forest together." Murphy takes a deep breath, his hand squeezing hers as he stares forward into the darkened forest. "The king wanted this. He believes the impression of our union will offer you further protection and support."

Serena tries pulling her hand away. "If the king wants to protect me, he knows what decision to make."

"Hush," Murphy whispers. "I told you we aren't actually going to do anything. I'm old enough to be your father."

Gross, thinks Serena. She risks a glance back at Kai. He is staring at Murphy and Serena's interlocked hands. She relaxes, no longer struggling in Murphy's tight grasp. She remembers how Kai made her leave the dummy head on the floor while training in the archives. In a kingdom filled with the buzz of rumors, impressions are everything. Maybe if Society thinks she is paired with the Head of the Guard, they'll be less likely to offer her up to the wolves.

Besides, it serves Kai right. He shouldn't have chosen another.

"You don't have any of that wolfsbane nectar poison on this, do you?" he asks, glancing down at her hand.

One side of Serena's mouth curls up in a smile. "No." Stepping forward when Murphy does, she follows his lead into the tree line.

As soon as Murphy and Serena are hidden among the trees, he releases her hand. Though she was almost positive his intentions were not to take advantage of the full moon, she breathes a sigh of relief.

"You weren't lying," he says. "You've been busy." He leans to the side as an especially long strand of wolfsbane floats toward him.

"Stay fully scaled," Serena reminds him. "It won't be as bad if the wolfsbane touches you."

"I wasn't planning otherwise," Murphy says, looking out in the forest. "Do you think your werewolf is here?"

Serena sniffs the air. The wind has died down so scents won't travel far. "I don't know. I could always call for him, if you think that is wise."

"No, we don't want to draw attention to what we are doing tonight." Murphy glances at the beach. It has gone quiet. He turns back around quickly. "Even still…"

"It'd be better to know exactly where he is," Serena finishes the thought for Murphy. She takes a deep breath. "I think I'll go scout a bit."

"Then I'm coming with you," Murphy says.

"No." It comes out fast and clipped. "I mean—you have to stay here. If something happens, they'll need you." She thinks of the untrained maidens, holding crudely constructed arrows and bows, waiting just below the breakers. The Temporal Caste will definitely need Murphy, should anything happen.

She looks at the trident in her hand, then thrusts it toward Murphy.

He clicks his tongue, shaking his head. "Have you learned nothing Serena Moon-Shadow? Never give up your trident." He pushes it back at her.

"Well," she smiles, "you aren't exactly setting any examples there."

"Too right." He smiles back. "Now, go." He puts his large hand on her shoulder. "Be quick and be safe. It won't take them long, and they'll each return to the water as soon as they finish. I'll patrol here until the last couple leaves. But they need to see us enter the water together, too."

They part, and Serena turns, hopping through the line of flowers before she has a chance to change her mind. She uses her trident to push aside the last rope of wolfsbane, and then she is on the other side of the border from her kinsmen, alone—or so she hopes.

Serena makes her way through the forest, first checking her tree. There are no new footprint borders around her circle, and no wolf either. She sniffs the air but the wind has gone silent. She can't remember the last time the night was as still as this.

She pauses, considering calling for Liam. Not knowing feels worse—she'd rather have him by her side, where she can keep an eye on him.

But what if more than just Liam come? It is a full moon, after all.

Serena considers returning to the beach. Standing in the forest with Murphy, though, trying not to imagine what is taking place on the beach, would be an awkward sort of torture. Instead, she continues to walk, keeping a parallel path to the beach.

Serena thinks of the three other maidens alongside her that were not chosen as mates. Like herself, they are not nearly as developed as the rest. They didn't have the full curves of Cordelia. They also kept their eyes downcast as each of the guard members went down the line. The guards only chose those that were ready and willing. Her curiosity of the events unfolding at the beach piques.

Before long, Serena is traveling uphill, using the stem of a trident to help propel her up a steep mountainside. It is territory she has never explored, and it is a stupid decision, especially on a night like this. But she needs to get away—away from Murphy and his impressions, forced upon her by the king himself. She needs to get away from Simone and her cherry red lips that are all over Kai by now.

With each step uphill, gravity pulls harder. Serena crashes through the unfamiliar landscape, angry with herself, and with her people. She quickly becomes clumsy with exhaustion, all too aware of how much farther she is from the ocean. Breath coming only in short, hard bursts, her gills flare, desperate for the comforting slide of oxygenated water. A thorn bush latches on to her scaled legs, and Serena pulls away from it.

"Let go!" She digs in her heels and gives another tug. It releases her, and Serena stumbles into a clearing.

The area is only a few spans wide, surrounded by harsh, barbed plants and a dry, cracked ground. The land is lit by the moon, bright and full, and

closer to Serena than it's ever been. Serena isn't entranced by the moon, as much as she should be. She is looking at the sliver of a shadow that blocks it.

The form turns, a silhouette with wide shoulders. Serena steps to the side, the figure rotating with her. Finally, the moonlight ceases to shine directly in her eyes, instead falling on Liam's face.

"Careful," Liam says, gesturing to the cliffs that overlook Forest Beach and the ocean beyond it. "Another step and you'll be reunited with your friends sooner than you want."

Serena looks down. Her webbed feet toe the line of a drop-off. Keeping her heels planted, she peeks over the ledge at the mating Undine hundreds of yards below. Some have sought out secluded areas. Others…not so much.

Her cheeks heat, and Serena finds herself searching for Simone's bright red coloring. Simone and Kai are either no longer there, or Simone is covered in sand, obscuring her scales. Either is possible.

Serena peels her eyes away from the beach.

Liam is still staring at the mating Undine, lips pursed.

Anxious for a distraction, Serena notices the cracked ground is covered in light footprints. Liam's footprints. His scent is also much stronger in the little area.

"You spend a lot of time here," Serena says.

Liam nods. Serena looks out over the water, imagining her and Kai splashing each other at the surface, far out of reach of the land. She remembers the howl from this very cliff that cut through their laughter.

"For the view of the moon or the view of the ocean?" she asks.

Liam smiles. "A little of both, I suppose."

Their eyes fall to the Undine on the beach below them. One pair is already retreating into the water. Serena breathes a small sigh of relief for them—and for herself.

"You weren't invited?" Liam gestures down at the beach. "To the party?"

"I'm not all that popular with Society," says Serena.

"Could've fooled me," says Liam. "When I saw you enter the forest with the big one…"

Serena frowns. "Just how good is your eyesight?"

He has a half smile now. "It's better during the full moon."

They both glance at the luminous, perfect circle suspended in the sky, beautiful and ominous at the same time.

"You haven't transformed yet. Will you be able to keep your human form all night?" she asks.

"Not all night."

Serena takes a step back, hoping he can keep it together until she departs. But she's not sure he wants to. Far below her, another pair finishes and enters the ocean, hand in hand.

"What about the other patrols?" she asks, trying to keep him talking.

"I sent them home. They won't be botherin' you. Not tonight." He finally takes his eyes away from the beach, resting them on her. "Alaric is growing more desperate and the mating tonight will be one to remember." He says it casually, like he is mentioning what he had for dinner.

Swearing she can see flashes of his red in his brown-eyed gaze, she takes another step back, toward the cliff. "They won't be suspicious that you aren't there?"

He smiles, all white teeth. The little wrinkles around his eyes appear again. "They were just all relieved they didn't have to patrol themselves."

Serena finds herself staring at his teeth. *Do they look pointier than usual?*

She takes another step back. Her foot does not hit ground, there is only air.

"Serena!" Liam tries to grab for her.

Afraid of finding herself in his arms, Serena retracts from his hands. The extra momentum causes her to lean farther away and sends her right over the edge of the cliff.

Breath catching in her throat, she gasps. Her entire body is in free fall. It lasts only a second, but to her, it is a lifetime. Her scaled fingers grab hold of the ledge.

She hears scraping below. Against her better judgment, she looks down. Her trident is falling, the three prongs scraping the rocky cliff. It lands with a soft thud in the sand. From this height, it looks like a toothpick. The trident, along with the rest of the world, starts spinning. Vertigo kicks in as she dangles from the ledge.

"Don’t scream, don't scream," she whispers to herself. Serena clamps her mouth shut. She cannot attract any attention from below. Poseidon be

graced, no one noticed the trident. But if the Undine couples were to look up, there would be no finishing for them.

"Serena—grab my hand!" Liam yells.

"Please be quiet," Serena hisses up at him. The small ledge she hangs from crumbles under her grasp. She falls a little farther, catching another rocky outcrop with her other hand. Adrenaline rushes through her head. Black spots dot her vision.

"Serena, if you slip again, you will be out of my reach." His voice is stern, but not panicked. "Grab. My. Hand. And do it now."

Serena focuses on the fingertips, centimeters from her own. It is at least steady, when the rest of the world is spinning in her peripherals.

A few more rocks crumble underneath her grasp, and Serena can see spiky brown hairs begin to emerge from Liam's skin. His nails grow longer and…yellower.

"Liam?"

"Serena…" his eyes are squeezed shut, a grimace on his face. He reaches a little farther. Not because of a stretch. Bones in his fingers pop as they become disjointed, then meld back together. His limbs grow longer, and his hand is in full fur mode. One sharp claw scrapes along the scales on her finger, sending chills up and down her body. The talon is pale yellow against her midnight blue scales—like the reflection of the moon cast upon the ocean.

"Serena!" he says again. His voice is strained as he flings his eyes open. They are bright red. There is no denying it—he is a different wolf under the full moon.

Her heart jumps up into her throat. Her arm begins to shake, and she whimpers with indecision. *Risk the fall or risk the wolf?* Serena does not miss the irony—it is a similar decision King Merrick will make for her.

She looks down again. She might actually survive the fall—maybe she can push out and hit water. Surviving the wolf is…debatable.

One deep breath, and she swings her free arm up. Serena grabs him at the wrist, figuring his paws are useless without opposable thumbs. As she squeezes tight, both hands holding on now, he pulls. It is one, quick jerk—so strong she flies up and over him.

His shoulders begin popping out of their joints. Had she waited one second longer, she might have pulled them both over.

Hitting the ground hard and face down, the breath is knocked from her lungs. Her mouth opens and closes in tandem with her gills, both desperately reaching for oxygen. Liam's popping and groaning becomes muted as Serena fights for air.

Finally, her lungs expand. She breathes, panic ebbing and pain setting in. Pushing herself up onto her knees she spots Liam in a heap, head ducked under paws. His clothes are ripping and fur pokes through. He is transforming right before her.

Serena scrambles backward in a crab walk. In a blind panic, she can't seem to get on her feet.

"Serena…" Liam is still trying to talk, but the name he calls ends in a growl. He is hunched over, with the moon glaring behind him, like he carries the burden of Earth's satellite on his back.

While her hands slide on loose pebbles, Liam leaps, covering her with his own body. Fear slithers around Serena like a sea snake, constricting her chest and squeezing her throat.

She stares as his snout grows long, wrinkling when he pulls his lips back in a snarl. The teeth that made up his previously perfect and gleaming smile are nowhere to be found. Dagger-like fangs cut through his gums, dropping blood and saliva across Serena's chest, neck, and face.

She brings a shaky hand to her cheek, wiping it away.

"Liam!" Serena yells.

Roaring drowns out her screams with raw power that resonates straight to her bones.

She pushes up on her elbows, forcing herself to stare into his red eyes. He is fully transformed, breathing hard with the effort.

Latching on to the color in his eyes, Serena embraces it. She pulls energy into herself, feeling heat burn behind her own eyes. *I refuse to be a part of this*, she tells herself. *No more victims, no more sacrifices.*

Serena will fight for her life, and she will help the Undine fight for their beaches. Leaning forward, one side of her lip imitates the snarl in front of her.

"I quit," she breathes right back into him. They continue to stare each other down. "Now—get off!" She draws her knees in, then pushes her legs out straight into his chest, like Kai showed her. Liam flies off, falling to the side. His head hits a boulder, hard. Momentum rolls his body farther away, into the bushes.

Serena gets to her feet, reaching for her trident before she realizes it is long gone. Eyes scanning the shrubbery beyond the clearing, she spots the wolf in a heap, not moving. His hide is covered in thorns, but it rises and falls in slow, steady breaths.

Serena turns and runs away.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Are they all gone?" Serena asks, stomping through the forest. She is only slightly less clumsy through the border of wolfsbane flowers.

"Yes—" Murphy cuts off when he turns to look at her. "What happened to your face? And your arms?" He gingerly lifts one of her arms. It is covered in scratches from her fingertips to her shoulders. Several scales are missing.

The cliff held strong for Serena, but at a price.

Murphy's forehead is creased with worry. Until he makes a show about looking at both her hands, and behind her back. His lips turn down in a full frown. "Where in the hell is your trident?"

Serena's arms drop to her sides. "Over there, come on."

"Over there?" He holds his hands in the air. "Over there?"

Serena emerges from the tree line, walking out onto the sand with Murphy on her heels, chastising her.

"Was Kai not clear about keeping your weapon with you, at all times?" His eyes are already scanning ahead, spotting a gleam of gold in the otherwise beige sand. "Agh!" His throat makes a guttural, choking sound. "Unbelievable."

Serena stops to survey her arms as Murphy picks up the trident, blowing sand off.

"Here." He pushes the trident out to her so aggressively Serena has to take a step back.

"Thanks," she mumbles, taking it.

Murphy rubs his temples.

"I'm sorry," says Serena.

"What happened?" he asks.

"Well…" Serena trails off, looking up at the cliffs. She doesn't really want to tell Murphy. Not until she has had time to process it herself. "Um, I tripped?"

"You tripped?" he crosses his arms, and raises an eyebrow. His look all but tells her she can do better. "You know what?" he sighs, lowering his arms. "That doesn't really matter right now."

Serena grunts. *I almost just died and it 'doesn't really matter right now'. Story of my life.*

"We have to go back home. People will be watching us, believing we have a connection now. We have to play the part."

"I don't exactly look like I've been rolling around in the sand," Serena says, holding her arms up.

"No," says Murphy, looking at her. "But maybe the woods?"

"Yeah, maybe." Serena smiles. The joke is his way of apologizing, but an uncomfortable silence follows.

Serena takes a deep breath. Tonight was a success—for the Undine, anyway. She really couldn't have asked for it to go better, fangs and fur aside.

Murphy clears his throat. "Shall we?" Murphy holds up his arm, bent at the elbow.

Serena glances up at the cliffs, worried about Liam. But she certainly can't go back now and risk facing the beast if he is awake.

She takes Murphy's arm, her hand nestled in the crook of his elbow. The pair walk into the waves, with only silence at their backs.

* * *

Their entrance into the Great Hall is similar. Hand in arm, they walk in with synchronized steps. The paired couples each stand together, in front of the king and Nerin. A few others have gathered, mostly family and friends of the Undine maidens and guards.

Nerin! Serena glances at the King's second, thinking about how uptight she appeared even when Hailey was just talking about Murphy as a previous potential mate. Nerin's lips are pursed, eyes narrowed. Serena leans into Murphy. "Was your mom upset about the king's idea?"

Murphy glances at Nerin, then Serena. "The king wanted us paired for real. She refused, and they finally came to an agreement that only the impression would be upheld."

Murphy and Serena's coordinated steps echo in the cavern. All eyes snap to them. For once, Serena is relieved to be in the Great Hall, even if she is the center of attention.

They pass the small crowd that has gathered. Serena can feel their eyes travel down the scratches on her arm and she hopes she managed to wipe most of the wolf blood from her face.

"I knew he'd be rough," Serena hears one of the elderly Undine whisper to her friend. The couples that returned before them must have reported Serena and Murphy disappearing into the woods together.

"Of course he would," the friend whispers back. "He didn't get to be head of the King's Guard by being gentle."

Serena's cheeks flush. *As if this wasn't already awkward enough.*

Murphy's stony face and sure steps do not falter. He leads Serena right up to the mid-platform, forcing his way in between two couples who have to back up to give them room. Disconnecting, Murphy and Serena's arms drops to their sides. He clicks his heels together, and bows—quick and purposeful. Serena curtsies. It is more graceful and slightly slower, but she is aware their separate movements complement each other.

This is weird, she thinks.

King Merrick looks at Serena. His gaze moves to her arms. His eyebrows grow together with his frown, and he shoots a glance at Murphy.

Standing beside the king, Nerin clears her throat. "Your king and Society thank you for your protection." Nerin is good at putting a stop to awkward moments.

Serena leans back, looking behind Murphy's shoulder to steal a glance at Ervin and Cordelia. They look…happy. Her eyes flit to Kai and his partner. Simone's lower lip sticks out, pouting. Kai is glaring at Murphy.

He's jealous? After he chose another mate? How is that fair?

Serena squeezes her eyes shut. *First the cliff, then Liam—no*, Serena tells herself, *then the werewolf*. After all that, Murphy yelling about her losing her trident. *He's lucky he didn't get a trident shoved right up his—*

"Serena!"

Serena's eyes snap to Nerin.

"The king wishes to know the details of the event. Do not ignore him."

Serena looks at the king; his downturned mouth tells her he is not happy.

"Details?" ask Serena.

King Merrick and Nerin both nod.

What kind of details could they possibly want? All I saw was Undine rolling around in the sand. Unless…does he want details about me and

Murphy? Did everyone else give details before we walked in?

Serena shoots a glance at Murphy. He notices.

"Your majesty, I don't think—"

"Grace Poseidon, man," King Merrick interrupts Murphy. "All I need to know is if there were any werewolves!"

Murphy looks at Serena, eyes narrowed, as if it were her fault he defended her in front of the king.

Serena rubs one palm across the scratches on her arm, all too aware of the words she told Liam not an hour ago; *I quit*. Somehow, it is much harder to say standing here in front of the king, Nerin, Murphy, and Kai who spent hours to help train her, and in front of her Temporal Caste—once the last of their race, now hoping that on this night they conceived the next generation of Undine.

Serena mumbles under her breath.

The king leans forward. "What was that?"

Serena's eyes snap up, and she takes several steps holding her trident diagonally across her body.

She can hear Murphy scramble behind her. "Serena!" he hisses.

"Serena…" Nerin does the same.

She ignores them, eyes locked on the king.

She takes the first step up to his throne, pushing aside his massive tail with the stem of her trident.

The king's eyes widen in shock.

Three more steps, and their eyes are level. She stops and leans forward.

"There were no werewolves tonight. Your people are safe." All she can think of when she says this is bloody fangs, inches from her neck.

The king does not return her glare, at least not with the same ferocity. "I think you mean to say our people are safe."

Serena blinks. *Dang it. I definitely can't quit now.*

She eases off the king, backing down the steps. Murphy waits for her, he must have followed almost all the way to the throne.

"If there isn't anything else—" the king begins.

"There is something else," interrupts Serena, her back to him.

"What now?" growls the king.

Serena glances at Ervin, then Kai. "I request permission to access the king’s library."

"Why?" asks the king. His voice is loud, nearly at a shout.

Serena turns, squaring her shoulders to King Merrick. "So I can protect our people, damn you!" She slams the stem of her trident into the cave floor. The crack echoes across the cavern; same as when the king demands the attention of his people.

The room goes silent, except for Serena's hard breathing. Her eyes are full of fury, and she could care less that she just damned her own king.

King Merrick leans back in his throne, mouth twitching. "Permission granted."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Serena turns to leave, a quick bob of her head sufficing for a departing curtsey to the king.

"Wait!" Murphy calls after her. "I will escort you there!"

"Any escort will need to get their own damn permission," she yells over her shoulder, not stopping.

There is a flurry of Undine talking over one another—Kai and Murphy, among others. As she exits the Great Hall, all she can hear is the king saying, "permission denied."

Serena smiles as she turns the corner.

She is to the archives in record time. She runs into the cavern of books, dripping wet with her robe in one hand and slippers in the other. "Mariam!"

Mariam is not at the catalogues. Serena runs to the first of the shelves, circling them.

"Mariam!"

She is stumbling into her slippers when Mariam emerges from the orca section, three books balanced in one arm and an open book in another. "What is it, child?"

"He gave me permission." Serena is red-faced, and out of breath. She doesn't actually have proof, finally wondering if she should have waited for a scroll or something. Surely Mariam knows Serena would not lie to her, least of all about the King's Library. If Mariam allowed unauthorized entry, she would lose her job.

Mariam makes a pointed glance at the robe, still draped over Serena's arm.

"Oh," Serena mumbles, slipping on the robe.

Mariam is still staring at her.

Serena's eyes jump from Mariam to the darkened entry of the King's Library, and back.

Mariam sighs. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes!" It is all she can do to keep herself from shoving Mariam toward the section. Shifting from one foot to another, Serena is practically

hopping by the time Mariam walks to one of the walls.

Mariam unravels a cord strung around a nail, then pulls. A metal sheet slides open above the restricted area, filling it with light. The dust is so thick, you can see speckles floating in the air.

Serena pauses by the sign that reads 'restricted'. Running her finger over the three holes made by her trident when she was with Kai, Serena looks in the room again. Her hand drops to her side and she takes a tentative step forward amidst the settling dust. Although the restricted section is lined with shelves, the books are sparse. Serena could make her way through them in a month, tops.

"I thought it'd be bigger than this," Serena says, laying her hand upon one of the larger, hardback books. It is the Ancestral Book of the Undine, listing family lineages all the way back to the very first Undine, Atargatis, the Lady Goddess of the Sea.

Mom, Serena thinks. *I could find out more…*

Mariam sighs and walks into the room, pulling Serena from her thoughts. She pushes against the back wall on one side. It moves, slowly. A hidden door scrapes against cave floor. Mariam reaches inside, and tugs on another cord. Light protrudes from the room behind the half open door. Coughing at the plume of dust that floats out, Mariam turns back to Serena.

"This section was added after the Maiden's Massacre. The king selected one single book to be moved to his library, but wanted it hidden better."

Serena nods. This was the first door she's ever seen in Society.

Mariam exits, holding one arm out. Serena is clear to enter.

Serena moves her hand off the Ancestral Book, and steps forward. She knows exactly where she needs to start.

She walks past the rest of the shelves, and squeezes through the small space in the open door.

The dust in here hasn't had time to settle yet, and Serena coughs. Light filters down from the forest floor above illuminating a table in the middle of the room. On it lies one thick book. There is no title, nor cover pictures or markings that tell her the subject matter.

Serena opens the book. The first few pages are blank. No table of contents, author's note, or forward. But on the next page is a simple drawing of the wolfsbane flower. All at once, Serena remembers why she is here. Her fate did not lead her down the path of Archives Assistant—she

is the Werewolf Liaison, and nothing will change that. Not even Liam, pinning her down and shifting into a werewolf directly over her.

The book begins with a verse directly under the flower:

A simple beginning
a life-altering change
fins and scales
to fur and fangs

Serena freezes, mouth dropping open. She closes the book, picks it up, and brings it with her. Outside the King's Library, Mariam is standing by the catalogues.

"That didn't take long," Mariam says, setting down a book at the table.

"Of course not," says Serena. "It's right here on the first page, under the flower. Werewolves are made from Undine?"

Mariam takes a few steps closer. "Those words should never be spoken, and this book should never come out of the King's Library." Mariam turns Serena around by her shoulders, and pushes her forward.

Serena digs in her heels, resisting the forced momentum. "Did we make the werewolves?"

Mariam stops.

"I mean, I knew we made them, but not from our own kind."

The mentor sighs, shoulders drooping. She is not shocked by the news. She has read the book. Serena wonders who else has.

"Where do you think all of our males go?" Mariam asks.

"I thought they all died in the battles fought after the Maiden's Massacre."

"Those old enough went to battle. But there were very few male Undine to begin with, which has been the case for a while now. Before the massacre, we only kept the biggest ones."

Serena's mouth drops open even more.

"Well, go on then. Might as well ask me any questions you have. It'd be faster than plugging through that thing." Mariam motions to the book.

"Fins and scales to fur and fangs," Serena repeats. "No wonder they rose up against us. We abandoned them as babies."

Mariam places her finger to her lips, then glances over her shoulder, as if someone would choose now of all times to enter the largely unoccupied

archives.

"Male Undine calflings very often didn't survive three moons past their birth. They were weak, and so small. The female Undine showed ill effects as well, like their webbing…" Mariam gestures to Serena's feet. "But the majority made it. Whatever was changing us didn't seem to affect females as badly."

Serena sits down at the same table Ervin fell asleep on, inebriated with jasmine and chamomile tea. She wishes she had some now.

Mariam continues, "Times became desperate. Most of the elderly called it 'Poseidon's Curse'. Said we didn't respect the old gods like Society used to. All available maidens went through The Selection—we didn't have a choice. I, myself, lost three calflings."

Serena glances up. Mariam ran the palm of one hand up and down her arm, her eyes on the floor.

Mariam shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. "It was too much. We were all under stress. The Ungainly began to get closer. Some tour company wanted to set up shop. We needed protection—and time. Hailey's predecessor came up with the potion. It didn't work, at first, but it was tweaked. The details are in that book, there."

Serena looks down at the closed book underneath her hands.

"It changed them to something that could survive outside the water, though transformations still took place. Different…transformations."

Serena shudders, remembering just how different their transformations are.

"Our first was handed to an Ungainly we trusted, who owns a dive shop near the shore. He kept his divers away from us, and has been chasing away other dive shops for years."

"You mean, a maiden just gave up her baby to some Ungainly?"

Mariam looks at Serena with a hard stare. "You can watch only so many of your own babies die before you decide to do something drastic." Mariam grasps Serena's arm. "The calfling would've died if we hadn't. But with the Ungainly—and the transformations—the calfling survived. And what's more, he grew big, and fast. He turned only on the full moons and seemed drawn to the water, but would never enter."

Serena swallows, finally ready to ask a question. "How did they come to be our guards?"

Mariam smiles. "That was his Undine mother's doing. It was a solution to unite with our sons at least once during every moon cycle, and it became considered good luck to have their blessing for more healthy sons."

"So why did the werewolves decide to revolt?"

Mariam sits next to Serena at the table, her pinky brushing the spine of the book. "There are several theories. I don’t think anyone knows for sure."

"What do you think?" Serena prodded.

Mariam starts slowly, "The only thing our desperate times did was add more and more babies to their clan. Even the dive shop owner could not keep them all. When the first few grew old enough, they moved out and started the camp you saw. More and more babies were sent directly to the camp for raising. The clan grew strong. They organized, and adjusted well to Ungainly life—we did not." She takes a deep breath.

"I think they felt held back by their obligations to us. And you have to remember, there were a lot of emotions involved. Families were separated; grudges held. It isn't easy to lose a child, nor is it easy to learn you've been abandoned. But you have to understand—we couldn't have done it any other way." Mariam looks at Serena, resting half her palm over Serena's and half on the book. "They would've died, otherwise."

"Don't they know that? Why would it have gone so far as to lead to the Maiden's Massacre?" Serena's forehead creases in wrinkles.

Mariam pushes back from the table and stands. "That is something only the wolves can answer." She turns to walk to the catalogues, pausing halfway. "The wolves…and perhaps the king."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Serena spends the rest of the tide in the archives reading the book. By the time the light dies down, plunging the library into a predictable darkness, Serena folds the hardback closed, finished with the last page. Without a word to Mariam, she replaces the book in the hidden room and pulls on ropes, closing the light sources to both coves.

Serena goes directly to The Dry. There is a decision to be made, and Serena doesn't want the king to make it for her. As soon as her Ungainly legs hit soft sand on the beach, she sends out a call, loud and reckless, for Liam.

The ocean crawls forward, licking at her ankles, then retreats. One, two, three. On the fourth frothy wave, the forest in front of her moves in the wind. One braided rope, tinged with yellow, swings out. Serena knows her border of wolfsbane is still there.

The wind dies down and behind her there is a lull between the waves.

A voice howls from the forest. "About a month too early, girl—but if you are that anxious..."

It isn't Liam.

Serena's neck prickles with chills. "I am not here to submit," she says, her voice sounds small against the forest.

Laughter reaches out, playing tricks with her ears. It seems to come from everywhere. Serena looks between the trees, squinting. She can only smell one wolf, yet she feels surrounded. She brings her trident closer, holding it with both hands diagonally in front of her.

There is another lull in waves, as if the ocean herself waits to see what will happen next. The wind compensates for the quiet sea. Heavy gusts of air blow several strands of wolfsbane ropes out from between the trees. When they part like a curtain, Serena tries to focus beyond them. A blackened shadow leaps forward, taking the form of a werewolf. Its fur is as dark as the night, and its fangs are as yellow as the wolfsbane flower.

Serena raises her trident, and the wolf stops just short, snarling. He doesn't stare at the golden tips threatening to pierce his eyes—he stares at her.

"Alaric?" Serena recognizes him as the same werewolf that chased her the night of the excursion and as the one she watched confer with the king. The scars he left on her leg begin to burn.

Alaric pushes off his front paws, so he stands on two legs, towering above her. He is almost twice her size. He points one claw at her, the rest curling in. "I am the betrayed." His voice is gravelly and thick. The forest seems to lean forward with him, bearing down on Serena and her ocean. He sucks in a breath and seems to grow even taller. He roars, throwing spit against her hair as his growl thunders through her.

Serena uses a surge of adrenaline and lunges forward, aiming her trident at his midsection. He bats the weapon aside and Serena rolls with it so she doesn't lose her grip.

The werewolf follows. Serena gets to her feet, bringing the stem of her trident up to catch him under his chin. His jaw snaps shut as his head is thrown back. A quick spin, and she slams the stem of her weapon just behind his knees. His enormous body pounds against sand.

Beyond him, a plume of smoke drifts up from the trees. Serena sniffs the air. The scent of singed wolfsbane comes to her.

"No!"

They are burning the wolfsbane patch.

She starts forward, holding her trident at the ready. Still on the ground, Alaric reaches for Serena's foot. His claws dig in, ripping through the webbing between her toes.

Serena falls face first into the sand, knocking the wind out of her chest. She forces herself to move, rolling over. Her gills strain, searching for the air that won't come through her mouth. Instead, they suck in a steady stream of sand.

Alaric leaps, landing on top of Serena and pinning down her arms and legs.

Serena coughs, sputtering out granules that work their way from gill to mouth. The werewolf gets an eyeful of wet sand. He blinks furiously, releasing one of Serena's arms to paw at his face. Serena still grips her trident, so she thrusts it toward the wolf. It smashes into his snout with enough momentum to throw him off balance. Serena kicks out with her feet.

Just as on the night of the Temporal Caste excursion, Alaric flies, end over end, into the waves. This time, before he even splashes into the water,

Serena is on one knee nocking an arrow already drawn from her quiver. She takes aim, the wolf's eye set in her sights.

Someone pushes her bow down. The arrow shoots harmlessly into the sand.

"Please don't," Liam's words tumble out of him between heaving breaths. He looms over Serena in his Ungainly form. "Not yet. I have to make sure the majority of the pack would back us first, and not just seek revenge for him." His eyes plead with her, his mouth downturned, showing just a touch of the gleaming white teeth behind his lips. No sign of fangs, fur, or claws.

Serena glances out at the werewolf, dripping with cold seawater, as she stands.

"Careful, Serena," says Liam. "You don't want to start a war."

"Sorry," Serena says with bite to her voice. She retrieves the arrow stuck in the sand and puts it in her quiver. "But the war was started eighteen years ago. I'm going to finish it."

My life depends on it, she thinks.

Now at the breaker line, the wolf shakes his whole body, ridding his fur of the salty water.

Liam takes a step toward him. "Alaric—the wolfsbane patch is enough for tonight. Leave her alone."

The wolf shakes his head, but Serena cannot tell if it is because he is still wet or because he is saying no to Liam.

Alaric stalks around Liam and Serena. Serena can't help but notice the way Liam slowly inches his way in between the dueling pair. When Alaric's back is to the forest, he dips his head and shakes his fur again. This time drops of water do not fly off, but hair does. He sheds his fur, showing bright pink skin underneath. Bones crackle and pop, Serena can see their distortion beneath his skin.

Liam produces a cape from a bag that hangs around his waist on a string. When she looks back up, Alaric is in Ungainly form. It is a frighteningly fast transformation. Serena stares at his naked body until Liam throws the cape at Alaric.

Alaric smirks as he unfolds the cape, and wraps it around him.

Serena tightens her grip on the trident.

"I mean it, Alaric—leave her alone," says Liam.

Alaric glances at Liam. "I have left her alone, for almost eighteen years now." He ties his cape closed and lowers his gaze at Serena. Black, wispy hair falls around his face in wet strands. "Her time is running out."

Alaric steps to the side, forcing Serena to counter. They make a slow, wide circle, with Liam in the middle. Something tickles Serena's feet. She looks down to find she is standing in Alaric's shed hair.

Gross, she frowns, looking down. Moving her toes around, she makes a small pile of the hair. "If I choose to go with you, on the next full moon—what will become of me?" Serena asks, keeping his eyes on her face and not what she is doing in the sand.

Alaric lifts his chin, looking down his nose at Serena. "So your king will be giving you the choice?" The wind picks up, whipping his cape just below his knees.

Behind Alaric the tide is receding.

He is right, my time is running out.

Serena steps out from around Liam. "Why do you want me?"

Liam glances at Serena. "So you *are* the sacrifice he was talking about?"

Serena nods, and they both wait for Alaric's answer.

He huffs, crossing his arms. "Ungainly women have trouble yielding pups—only one has managed so far. We believe we need a maiden."

Serena's mouth drops open and beside her, she can see Liam do the same.

The tide is nowhere near Serena, but her ears ring with the sound of rushing water. Panic blooms in her gut, twisting its way up her chest like a sharpened knife.

Liam is the first to speak. "You never said that was part of the plan."

"What's the problem?" Alaric holds his arms to the side. "We get our pups—they get their little baby…fishies, or whatever. Everyone is happy."

"Not her," Liam shakes his head, fists clenched. "Find another if you must!" he screams, shoulders hunched and rounded.

"No." Alaric's tone is firm. "It has to be her. We need her bloodline."

Smoke tendrils from the wolfsbane patch slink across the sky, reaching out over the ocean from the forest. Soon, it will dissipate into the ocean, just like Ungainly CO^2, over time. Whatever happens in The Dry eventually creeps into the ocean, and the creatures of The Deep pay the

price. The Undine must have their beaches back, or they will never survive what is to come.

Alaric follows Serena's gaze to the smoke. "You hide behind the flower too much," Alaric's snarl turns up into a cruel, twisted smile. "There won't be any hiding after the next full moon."

"Serena," Liam turns toward her, but he keeps his gaze steady on Alaric. "Run."

She hesitates, considering both men. Liam's fingers are curled into his palms, and she can see the veins in his forearms turning a deep blue. Alaric stands with his feet shoulder-width apart, one slightly behind the other.

But there is nowhere to run. Two werewolves stand between her and the ocean, and behind her the wolfsbane patch is gone.

Alaric bows his head so he is staring at Serena through lowered lids.

"Serena…" Liam says. "Run—now!"

Serena bends for a quick second, laying her hand on the ground. Alaric lunges. She can see the action in his eyes before he does it. Serena dodges to the opposite side of Liam, opening her stride and aiming for the waves.

They are so far—the receding tide is wholly unnatural.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Alaric twist. It is a canine-like move, yet he is still in Ungainly form. Footsteps pound the sand behind her, approaching quickly. Just as Alaric is about to slam into her, Liam collides with him mid-air. They both fly over Serena as she sprints.

She can hear them hit the sand behind her and she prays they don't transform until she is submerged. The scales along her legs, responding to the fear coursing through her body, begin to fuse. Icy salt water splashes against her ankles as she reaches the farthest stretch of water. It encourages the remaining scales to emerge, forcing her legs together. The webbing between her toes grows into fins and Serena reaches full transformation before she is deep enough to swim.

She looks over her shoulder and sees Alaric throw Liam into the trees. He turns, running for Serena before Liam even hits the ground. Serena doesn't flounder in the knee-deep water. Like an invertebrate staring at the glowing extension of the deep sea dragon fish, she is mesmerized, unable to react to the danger. Instead, she opens her mouth, letting her voice flow freely. She steadies her heaving breaths by opening her gills, allowing both organs to work simultaneously.

The ocean responds, and before Alaric can reach Serena, he is backpedaling in the sand. Serena looks to the water. A huge wave, at least twenty feet high, barrels toward them. Serena pushes up on her arms. Her fins flap once in anticipation.

The wave engulfs her and she is gone by the time it recedes. Scales extend around her closed fist, protecting the handful of Alaric's fur she holds.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Serena sputters on granules of sand stuck in her gills, mouth, and throat. Her heartbeat flutters as quickly as her fins, and she is still calling out, purely out of fear. It has morphed into her echolocation whistle, but it is as loud as ever. Her world materializes before her as the sound comes back to her.

Serena slows. There is a mass of forms in front of her, several dozen of her size, if not larger. She inches closer, and they come into view. Undine—and lots of them. Almost all of Society, Serena imagines.

Her eyes go wide. It was her call—the call that can't be resisted, except this time the king did not counter with his own.

Murphy and Kai approach, their eyebrows furrowed as they scrutinize Serena. Murphy swims around her, leaving her staring into Kai's eyes. They blaze with fury and his jawline is tight.

Serena turns her attention back to Murphy, who is peering closely at her torn webbing. When he moves back in front of her, his eyes match the fury Kai's have already shown. Murphy turns, facing Society alongside Serena. Opening his mouth, he releases his own sound. Compared to Serena's soft, caramel harmony, Murphy's is a bone-shaking boom.

Those in the first few rows are pushed back, shocked by the sound that is normally reserved for reprimanding the guard. Another movement comes from within the group. The King's Guard makes their way forward, organizing themselves in a V-formation in front of Society. Murphy takes his place at the apex, then motions for Serena to join him.

It is a battle formation, and Serena can't help but think just how unready they truly are. Three guards don't even have tridents.

Serena approaches Murphy, taking her place by his side, and raising her trident in the air. It signals the entire guard formation to move forward, something Serena has seen Murphy do hundreds of times.

She leads them in a sharp curve, practically cutting through the mass of Society gathered behind them. Shoulders back and chin high, Serena doesn't look back to make sure they follow her instead of moving toward The Dry. Once she reaches the caves, she transforms and heads straight for

the Great Hall. She can hear the sounds of several Undine emerging from the water behind her, and lets out a sigh of relief.

When she enters the Great Hall, Murphy is by her side, and the King's Guard is in a column behind them. The rest of Society enters in groups, quietly filling the room. King Merrick and Nerin are at the throne. As the council members come in, they take their place at the mid-platform.

Serena doesn't know when the last of the Undine filter in to the Great Hall, but the king nods, signaling her to speak.

"They are burning the wolfsbane patch," Serena says.

Sarafina, the Head Gardener, gasps. "All of it?"

Serena glances at her. She can't help but notice Sarafina’s scales are the same shade as wolfsbane. She probably takes the burning as a personal insult. Serena looks back to the king. "Yes, all of it."

"And how do you interpret this action, Werewolf Liaison?" the king asks.

"I think it is retribution, for the pairing," Serena says. "Somehow, he knows what happened."

The king nods, looking at Serena with sad eyes. "It was successful, the pairing. But it is unlikely they would continue to be so, especially with the wolfsbane gone."

Serena gets his meaning. It was a nice try, but there still must be a sacrifice—Serena in exchange for a new generation of Undine. He is aware that Serena knows of the deadline.

She glances at the king. "Do you know what they plan on doing with me?"

The king's spine goes rigid. "I…" he glances at Nerin. "I have never asked."

Serena nods, biting the inside of her cheek. There is a large lump in her throat, but tears do not come. She is too exhausted for tears, emotionally and physically. *Would it help, if I told him?*

The king slumps down in his chair, as if energy and life is slowly emitting from him. "What would you have me do, were you in my position?" he asks Serena, refusing to look at her.

Serena turns, surveying the crowd of Undine behind her. She sees Rayne and Mariam, leaning into each other for support. Cordelia is near the front, shooting nervous glances at Ervin, then back to Serena. Simone stands with the other Healer Assistants, all three staring openly at Serena.

She could make Kai happy, Serena thinks. *At least she seems willing enough.*

Serena turns back around to the king, lowering her voice. "I'd give me up, too."

"And that is your recommendation?" asks the king.

Folding her arms across her midsection, fingertips cradling her elbows, Serena stares at the three gashes her trident made in the cave floor. "Yes."

"Then it is settled," says the king, sitting up straight in his throne and bringing his trident to stand at his side. He raises his voice, so it permeates the Great Hall. "We go ashore in two days, and we will take our beaches back." He looks down at Serena, eyes blazing. In a softer voice, he tells her. "We will fight for our painted maiden."

Both relief and guilt flood her system, and Serena sags at the knees. Her hand goes to her mouth, and she has to doubt her king.

Is this the right call?

The king continues to speak to the crowd. "The council will convene in two hours to discuss the battle plan. And," the king looks at Serena, "the Werewolf Liaison's presence is requested."

Once Assembly is dismissed, Serena sinks even lower, her knees almost touching the floor.

"Serena," Kai is by her side, pulling her up. "Are you okay?"

"Yes…no." Serena shakes her head, trying to clear it of adrenaline. "I'm not sure." She looks up at him, remembering her anger at the pairing. But when Serena glances at Simone, she is turning away.

"What happened to you out there tonight?" asks Kai. "Your call was so desperate. Are you hurt? Were there wolves?"

Serena looks at him, eyes wide. He has no idea what just transpired at court.

"Liam was there—the one I normally see," says Serena. "And Alaric."

"Alaric?" Kai's mouth drops open and his eyes go wide. "Oh…"

"What?" asks Serena.

"Alaric was the first werewolf."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Being the first Undine calfling abandoned, Alaric's hatred burns deeper than most. In a way, Serena feels bad for him. She knows what it feels like to be left behind.

"And now the first wants his revenge on the last of our species," Serena says at a whisper, absently touching her mother's charm, embedded into the high center of her breastplate.

Serena feels Kai's warm hands move up her cold arms. He glances at the king.

"I think I understand what is going on." Kai looks back at Serena. "Alaric will never have you if I can help it," he tells her. She meets his sea-green eyes, boring into her. "Not if anyone of us can help it."

Taking a step back, Serena forces her gaze away. It is almost as difficult as resisting the pull of the moon. She can't let herself be caught up pining over Kai. The king has just ordered all of Society to war because of Serena. If she has to, she'll sacrifice herself, with or without the king's blessing—but she can't have Kai standing in her way or threatening to pull her back.

She focuses on the cold of the cave floor, imagining it seeping into her feet and up her legs, straight to her stomach where she feels the tingling sensation every time she looks at Kai. Dropping her hands to her sides, Serena glares at him.

"You said you'd wait for me…and then The Selection came, and you chose Simone." Serena swallows, determined to keep her voice steady. She fails as her next sentence comes out broken. "You chose Simone, the one Undine that is most unlike me."

Kai glances at the king, then at what jurors are still left in the Great Hall. He leans into Serena. "We can't do this here."

"Where, then?" she asks, almost yelling.

Nerin looks up from consulting with the king. Serena doesn't care. She needs to cut ties—if the battle goes badly, she doesn't plan on returning. How could she? Her surrender is the one thing that would leave the Undine race in peace.

"Come on," says Kai, taking her by the arm.

Serena allows herself to be led away from the Great Hall and down the corridor. The Undine bustle in and out of caves, charged with energy and calling out to each other. As Serena passes her kinsmen, under Kai's tight grasp, they look at her with curious, raised eyebrows. What has this girl done to warrant another full-scale attack on the wolves? There hasn't been one for a decade, now.

Serena shakes her head, keeping her eyes downcast. *If only they knew how much easier this could be.*

The smell of wood smoke could guide Serena to the armory blindfolded. There is a long line waiting outside the entrance. Maidens are volunteering to either enter The Dry as a second wave of reinforcements to the guard, or to wait in the breakers to execute their marksmanship skills. Crude bow and arrow sets are distributed, as are knives.

Kai stops at the end of the line and frowns. "I thought this would be a good place to talk."

Serena rolls her eyes. "It would be, anytime other than right before a battle." She twists her wrist out of Kai's grasp, and then grabs his. "Come on."

Moving toward the front of the line, pulling Kai behind her, Serena wedges her way in between bodies crowded in the packed hallway. Those being moved aside protest, until they see her. Then they grow quiet, just the way Serena likes it.

At the front of the line, Sasha Sunbeam is pleading with Ronan. "I want to fight."

Ronan shakes his head, and behind him, Murphy does this same. "The king's orders were clear, no one in the Temporal Caste goes to The Dry."

"But I wasn't even at the pairing," Sasha insists, a flash of red running through her bright orange scales. "I'm not with calfling—there is no reason to keep me back."

Serena turns, looking at Kai.

No one in the Temporal Caste? Surely they can't mean me, too.

"Sorry, Sasha. Please move aside," says Murphy.

Sasha turns away, almost running into Serena.

"Oh, sorry," mumbles Sasha.

Serena studies her closer—the maiden doesn't slouch with defeat, she is distracted and determined. When Sasha pauses, looking up at Serena, her whole face lightens, as though she's had another idea.

"You," Ronan calls out.

Serena turns as Sasha slinks away.

He bends the crook of his finger, motioning for her to enter the armory. Kai and Serena squeeze past Murphy—it isn't crowded at all inside next to the fires.

Ronan turns his gaze to Serena's trident. "It's been used."

Serena looks at her weapon. She wipes smudges off one of the tips. "That is what it was made for, right?"

Ronan grunts. "Let me at least sharpen it up for you."

Serena hands it over and the sound of metal touching a whirring stone drowns out all chance of talk. Kai and Serena cast nervous glances at each other, but neither holds the gaze.

Once Ronan finishes, he hands Serena back her weapon. "I have something else for you," he says. He retrieves an object at his workbench, then turns her around to place it in her quiver. "More arrows. These are stronger."

"Thanks, Ronan."

He moves in front of her, still holding one single arrow. It is smaller than the rest, and is made of a different material. It doesn't have as much give, and seems heavier.

"It'll pierce deeper," says Ronan, handing it to her. "Can get up to halfway into werewolf hide."

"Oh." Serena glances at Ronan. She reminds herself of all the battles fought ashore after the Maiden's Massacre, where they lost most of their male population. The expert with weapons that he is, Ronan must've been sent and it is a testament to his battle skills that he still with the Undine now.

She begins to put the arrow in the quiver but he stops her.

"Here," he says, pointing to a tab on the side of her breastplate. Farther down, there is another tab.

She unsnaps them, placing the arrow inside. When she presses the tabs back down, they hold the arrow securely.

"For emergencies," says Ronan, winking at her.

"Thank you."

Ronan grunts again and turns away. "The tridents will be finished by the time you go to The Dry," he tells Kai over his shoulder.

Serena smiles as Ronan rejoins Murphy at the cave entrance. That is all the well-wishing she will get from Ronan—a wink, a grunt, and several sharp weapons.

Turning her attention to Kai, she pulls him around the fire pit to the other side. Flames hide them from curious eyes peering in from the entrance to the armory.

Kai turns to Serena. "Simone and I—"

"Please, spare me the details," Serena interrupts, closing her eyes. She doesn't think she is strong enough to get rejected again—not by him. But when Serena opens her eyes, Kai is still in front of her waiting.

"You will hear me out," Kai says, his voice turning to steel. "You have to know this before we all go to battle. Simone and I didn't complete the pairing."

"What?" The statement catches her off guard. "Why not?"

"I told her I wasn't ready. We didn't do anything, except leave. She was not happy about it."

"Oh," Serena pulls her eyes from Kai and stares at the dying fire. She clutches a handful of Ronan's black powder and throws it over the pit. The blaze bursts out licking at Serena's scaled arms, then settles into a fierce burn.

"She only agreed not to make a fuss if we carried the illusion that we paired," continues Kai. "I think she is worried about her reputation among her peers."

Serena takes a deep breath, steeling herself for that penetrating gaze and turns back to Kai.

"You really are waiting…for *me*?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Kai looks down, his voice going softer, and reaches for her hands.

Without thinking Serena steps back. Her eyes hop from the fire, to Kai, and back to the fire again. Jittery fingers tap against the scales on her thighs; they need something to do. She throws another fistful of black powder on the fire. Flames lick the ceiling of the cavern. Out of distractions, Serena reaches back and pulls an arrow from her quiver. She runs the pad of her thumb over the sharp point. It is comforting to have something solid and real between her and Kai. He is pushing Serena into emotions she hasn't before come into.

"Stop," says Kai, taking the arrow from her. "Stop acting as if you aren't a part of us. You have a place here. You have a place with me."

He steps forward, wrapping his arm around Serena and pulling her close. Their breastplates crush against each other. Serena's heart is pounding so hard in her chest she is sure Kai can feel it through all of the armor.

He slides her arrow back in her quiver, her body jolting as the arrow is sheathed. But Kai doesn't step away. Serena goes still, anchored within his arms. She tilts her chin up, and his eyes are on her.

He waits…and I am ready.

Rising up onto her tiptoes, her lips find his. She presses closer, wrapping one hand around the back of his neck. Fire spreads in her stomach, moving up to her chest, and it burns hotter than fire beside them. It burns better than the sun.

Kai tastes of smoke and salt. Serena parts her lips, wanting more. He responds, wrapping his free hand around her waist, pressing her into him.

Serena rises farther on her toes, drifting away like the smoke from the armory fire dissipating through cracks into the ceiling, past The Dry and up into the heavens. Kai places his hand on her cheek, embracing Serena and softly bringing her back to The Deep. She opens her eyes and smiles while their lips still touch.

When they pull apart, Kai smiles back. "Worth it?" he asks.

She blushes, biting her lip. It still tastes of him. "Undeniably," she answers.

"Come on, we'd better get back to the Great Hall before they plan everything without us," Kai pulls her around the fire and pushes his way through the crowded entrance with Serena in tow.

As they walk, Serena touches her lips with the tips of her fingers.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

For the first time in many tides, there is no Assembly in the Great Hall. Only King Merrick, Nerin, Serena, and the king's council are invited to the closed session.

A table sits in the center of the mid-platform. Motioning from his seat at the center of the table, the king beckons for Kai and Serena to sit. They do, nodding to each of the other occupants. One chair remains empty.

An awkward silence follows, as everyone stares at their hands. King Merrick glances at Serena under his bushy eyebrows. Serena folds her hands in front of her, trying to pull off the look of a Werewolf Liaison. *Whatever that is.*

Moments pass, and she wiggles in her seat. It feels weird to sit in the same type of chair as the king. She looks again to make sure she saw correctly that his doesn't have any extra adornments, and that the chair isn't taller than the rest—even by an inch. It isn’t.

Still, the king towers over everyone else at the table. His shoulders are so wide, they extend past either edge of the chair. Beside him, Nerin is the complete opposite. She sits rigid, her back straight, but she still only comes up to the Kings shoulders. Serena wonders if he really isn't that tall. Maybe the chair has special lifts.

Serena leans back in her chair slowly and tries to appear casual as she glances under the table.

How did he get from the throne to the chair, without the high tide?

Serena's thoughts are interrupted by footsteps entering the Great Hall. Zayla strolls in, chin high, eyes locked on the empty chair. Serena straightens, glancing at the king. He appears not to have noticed her looking under the table at him. Nerin, of course, is frowning at Serena.

Zayla walks the long way around the table. Serena catches the scent of seasoned seaweed as she passes by. No sooner than she sits down does the king speak. "Let's begin. First, we'll need to know how many Undine will be going ashore."

"All that can fight, I imagine," says Evandre.

"No. I won't risk every last Undine to this threat," the king says.

"You don't have to risk anyone, save one," Serena mumbles.

The king slams his fist down. The entire table jolts and everyone flinches away from it like a school of herring scattering to avoid a shark. Only Nerin remains unfazed, her back so rigid she is as far as she can get from the table.

"I've made my decision," the king glowers as Serena, "and you will respect that. There will be no more talk of it."

Serena meets the king's eyes, her heart pumping like she's been racing up and down the beach all day. "As you say," she says, steady and even. The more the king refuses to take the right course of action, the more Serena wants to.

"The King's Guard will be the first wave ashore," Murphy begins slowly, breaking the silence and bringing everyone back to the task at hand. "We've accepted volunteer maidens to stand by as a second wave, though hopefully we won't need them. The third echelon will remain past the breakers, ready with their arrows. I have some of my guards conducting training right now."

The king nods. "Good. Many of the maidens have some experience, though maybe not the youngest generations."

"No Temporal Caste were accepted on the rosters, as you requested," Murphy says.

"Except me of course," Serena interrupts, glancing at the Head of the Guard.

Murphy pauses, looking at Serena then at the king. The rest of the table goes silent.

From the other end of the table, Zayla pushes back her chair and stands. "Your majesty, if you please, I'd like to announce my ruling on Serena's third and final punishment."

Now? Serena's eyes go wide. *She wouldn't…*

King Merrick nods his consent.

"I sentence Serena to prison. The amount of time to be determined by myself, or the king, when we have deemed she has learned her lesson."

"Prison," Serena repeats, blinking twice. "Prison!" She stares at Zayla, then turns to the king. "But I know our beaches. I know what can protect us in The Dry, and I know the capabilities of the wolves."

"Excellent. You can brief Murphy before you go below," says the king.

"And I thank you for your contribution," Murphy nods to Serena, as if that is the end of it.

Chair squeaking back as she stands, Serena raises her voice. "I am the Werewolf Liaison. You need me out there!"

"Serena…" Kai begins, leaning toward her. Serena turns, squaring her shoulders with Kai and fixing him with the fiercest glower she can muster.

He quiets, holding his hands up and leans back as far as his seat will allow.

Finally, the king turns to Serena. "You will not be going ashore. You will instead be carrying out your third and final punishment."

Serena glances at Murphy then the king, bringing her hand to the side of her breastplate, touching the special arrow Ronan gave her. "I am ready for this," she says, beseeching them to understand.

The king leans forward, clasping his hands together. "Regardless, Zayla's punishment stands. Besides, I will not risk the very maiden we go ashore to protect." He looks at Serena, eyes soft. "I will not risk my daughter."

The entire council goes still. A chill, colder than any werewolf can give Serena, runs up her spine. Next to the king, Nerin slouches in her seat. It is not disappointment. Rather, relief from the release of a burden carried too long.

"Daughter…" Evandre gives a nervous laugh next to the king. "What—?" She stops when the king turns toward her. Evandre glances at Nerin, then back at the king, and her smile drops from her face. "Daughter?" she says louder, staring at Serena.

Serena's mind races, trying to connect the dots. But there are no dots to connect. Her parents were killed by werewolves, and she has been alone ever since.

King Murphy picks up his trident and turns one side of it toward Serena. Right where the three prongs are melded together at their base by a crescent moon, rests a jewel. Midnight blue, with dark gray and black swirls throughout. Serena's fingertips move to the charm at her breastplate. The amulets match perfectly.

"Do you know how many times I've had to turn my trident to keep the jewel from prying eyes? I dare say most of Society isn't even aware a jewel was there to begin with," the king spins the entire trident slowly in circles, rolling it between his fingers. Evandre stares up at it, mouth open.

Serena snaps her own mouth shut, anger heating her face.

"You carry the family stone," he says. "You are heir to the throne, Serena. Worthy of the same shaded scales as the very first Undine, passed down through our lineage. Of course," the kings stops spinning his trident, glancing at Serena, "I've had all proof of that relegated to the King's Library."

"But…why?" Kai asks. "Why was the king's daughter raised as an orphan?"

Serena sinks into her chair, glad someone can speak for her. Hard lumps rise up from her stomach to her throat, making it hard to breath, much less speak. Zayla won't look at Serena.

She knew, possibly all along.

"My wife and son departed the night of the Maiden's Massacre, that much is true," says the king, voice hallow as he talks. "Those wolves tore through Undine bodies so badly, we could barely distinguish what parts belonged to each maiden and child. Had we not known how many went ashore, we'd have no idea how many casualties there were. Only one remained whole amidst the bloodshed by the time I got there." The king glances up. "Serena." He swallows, hard. "My wife was with twins. We kept it a secret throughout the pregnancy, though she was so large it was hard to hide it. We didn't announce it because, well—we just didn't want to jinx anything." The king lets out a strangled laugh that threatens to turn into a sob.

Nerin lays her hand on the king's arm.

He takes a deep breath, composing himself, and continues. "The wolves had an advantage— they could have torn into you just as easily. But they agreed to let me take you home, on one condition." The king looks at Serena. "That I return you to them on your eighteenth birthday."

Kai is the only one moving at the table. He keeps glancing in between Serena and the king, his fists clenching and unclenching.

"Why play such games?" demands Kai. "If they wanted her, why didn't they just keep her?"

"Alaric," the king sneers. He takes another deep breath. "Alaric is very cruel. He never forgave us for his abandonment, and he wanted something that would hurt me deeper. To give up a child after watching her grow…" he looks at Serena again. "Watch her graduate from her first caste, watch her swimming with her caste mates, watch her enter The Choosing and

even watch her endure The Selection, with her chin held high..." The king shakes his head.

"He knew the distraction would drive me desperate. And I did desperate things in those first days. I sent wave after wave of Undine ashore to stop the threat, to protect my daughter. They were all slaughtered. Alaric was coaxing us out—and we lost more than half our species, almost all of our remaining males because of it."

Serena's hands lay flat on the table, shaking. Nerin places her own hands over them. "Serena—the idea to put you in the orphanage was my own."

Refusing to meet any eyes at the table, Serena keeps her gaze down in her lap.

"We didn't know how events were to play out, but I thought if the king ever did have to give you up, that it might be better to keep the two of you disconnected," says Nerin, squeezing Serena's hand.

The king nods his head. "While I was looking out for your best interests, Nerin was looking out for Society's best interests."

Tears spill over Serena's cheeks. Kai moves toward her, but Serena holds up a hand, warding him away. He sits back down, hesitantly.

"I became attached to you anyway, from a distance. Especially as I watched you grow into a young maiden," the king tries to smile, but it ends up looking like a lopsided frown. "I thought maybe if I named you Werewolf Liaison—you would conjure a miracle, since the whole matter has long since been out of my hands. I thought you would grow to love them, find a place there."

At this, Serena can see Kai tense out of the corner of her eye.

"I thought—what a relief this would be, if Serena might find happiness out of it, some way." He buries his head in his hands. "At the same time, I beat myself up over the decision. I also wanted to keep you here, and make you my heir. But I knew I had some making up to do, which is why I kept putting you in the spotlight. I thought if only the rest of Society could see how wonderful you are. How hard you work to protect our way of life, how smart and brave you are, and the magic your voice holds when you sing—like your mother. Then maybe they would embrace you as their queen."

"Enough," Serena says, voice cracking. She pulls her hands away from Nerin and wipes her cheeks dry. "I don't want to hear anymore."

The king, Nerin, and the rest of the table look at Serena, waiting. She squares her shoulders with the king and swallows hard. "I think that you've made some really poor decisions, and not just for me, but for the entire kingdom."

The king doesn't deny it, but nor does he nod. He stares at his hands, the shadows of the cavern creeping into the deep lines that etch his face.

"And I think," continues Serena, "that you are about to make another poor decision." She squeezes her hands into fists. "Instead of sentencing me to prison, give me to the wolves. Make peace with them. We are helpless to stop the decline of our ecosystem—we might be forced to the beaches soon enough. And if we haven't resolved our differences with the wolves, there will be none of us left, anyway."

"No—I won't do it," says the king.

"It's one for the whole of Society," says Serena, on the verge of shouting. "Why can't you see reason?"

He looks up at her. "I haven't seen reason since the day you were born, Serenita."

She sits back in her chair, tears threatening to spill over again at the diminutive Rayne so often called her, though now it comes from the king himself.

Serena shrugs. "I can't—I can't sit back watching the entire kingdom risk their lives for me." It doesn't seem right, no matter how much of an outcast they all made her feel she was.

The king smiles and blinks slowly.

"I figured as much." He raises his head, shouting out to the guards at the entrance of the Great Hall. "Take her to the pit."

Two guards come alongside her, thick hands closing around her arms. They lift her from her chair, turning her away.

"Be careful, please," says the king. "She is my daughter."

Pain spears up to her heart. Serena hunches over, grasping at her chest with her hands. It is difficult to breathe.

The king turns away, refusing to look at her.

Collapsing in on herself, Serena's feet drag. She is pulled the length of the Great Hall purely by the strength of the guards that hold her.

As they leave the room, the king resumes speaking to his council, his voice laced with steel. "We go to The Dry at dawn tomorrow. There are many preparations yet to attend to, and we will need every Undine’s

assistance. We will go ashore strong and proud, and we will fight for our right to extend the Undine legacy into the next generation."

His words fade as Serena and the guards move down the corridor.

Only silence emanates from the maidens they pass. Most are too busy to even notice. They are busy with preparations—determined chins raised high, set jawlines, and jittery fingers—anxious to finally wield the weapons that Ronan is working round the clock to construct. The colors of the Painted Maidens shine bright under the glittering minerals of the cavern hallways. They are bold colors—deep reds and blues, and brilliant greens and purples. There are hues of gold and yellow, and of course one bright spot of orange.

Turning a corner, the floor spirals as it drops into a sharp decline.

Serena doesn't talk. Her tongue is numb, her brain is numb, and her heart is numb.

The light dripping from above winks out, and Serena and her guards plummet into darkness. Beside her, strands of bioluminescence in the guards' hair flickers to life, providing enough light to navigate the uneven ground.

After what seems like an eternity walking down into the Earth, Serena lifts her chin just in time to see a spacious cavern open up above them, painted with colorful images of ancient sea deities. Poseidon is in the center, standing erect with one arm raised. His beard hangs past his chiseled chest, and a tunic hangs loose around his waist, obscuring an answer to the age-old debate—if Poseidon himself has scales and fins.

Serena is so engrossed in the paintings, she doesn't see the small, circular hole in the middle of the floor. Her foot hits nothing but air and she lurches forward. The guards' grip around her arms tighten and pull her back.

Almost thanking them, Serena snaps her mouth shut, remembering what they are about to do to her. She peers into the hole, it is pitch black. Realizing what exactly an Undine prison looks like, her heart starts racing all over again. She glances at one of the guards, but can't remember his name.

The other takes away her trident, and undoes the ties holding her breastplate on.

"Don't—just…I'll do it," Serena steps back, out of his reach. Shrugging out of her armor, she places it upright against the wall, right next to her

trident. "It stays here," she says, staring them both in the eye.

They glance at each other, then nod. Serena walks back to the hole. "How far of a drop is it?" she asks.

One of them looks at her out of the corner of his eye. "If you really are the heir to the throne, I'm sorry about this. Please remember we are just following the king's orders."

"What—?"

Serena cuts off at her own gasp when they push her forward, right over the hole. She falls, her breath hitching in her throat and her stomach rising into her chest. She tucks her legs, expecting to hit hard ground any second. Instead, she hits water and it feels just as solid as the tree branches she so often crashed into in The Dry.

Plunging under, she automatically closes her mouth and her gills open. She waits until the stinging sensation on her legs subsides, then she opens her eyes. Pitch black. The water tastes stale.

She forms fins, then flutters her tail until she rises to the surface. The hole above is outlined by the receding glow of the guards' hair.

"Wait!" Serena calls. "How long are you keeping me here?"

The glow continues to withdraw. "What if I escape?" Serena says to herself, voice at a whisper.

"You won't," another voice answers her.

Serena turns sharply, peering into the darkness. "Who is that?"

The voice laughs. "Just…wait one more moment, and you will see."

"What?" Serena still turns, treading water.

Above, the glow has disappeared entirely. Serena keeps her eyes up, desperate for some sort of light source other than her own hair. It doesn't help illuminate anything past her fingertips.

The ceiling of the cavern above the hole begins to blink. Minerals glimmer like a spray of moonlight scattered across the surface of the sea. Poseidon himself lights up, his face and body illuminated with radiant specks of stone.

Ripples in the water softly bump into Serena and she tears her eyes away from the sea god. The crest on each ripple is highlighted with color. Serena follows them to their origin, where a dark shape is moving slowly toward her. The maiden brings her own hair to light, and the features of her face are illuminated. High cheekbones and pointed nose create a gaunt, almost haunting, appearance.

"Arista," says the maiden, introducing herself.

Serena nods and lights some of her own strands so the maiden can look upon her face, but she doesn't have to state her name.

"Serena Moon-Shadow," the maiden states for her.

Leaning back slightly, Serena narrows her eyes. "How do you know?"

"The King's Library," Arista says. "Your lineage is the first in the ancestral book. You are the heir to the throne."

Serena remembers having her hand on the book, about to open it until the other room appeared, catching her attention. If only she'd taken the time to read the ancestral book, certain secrets would have been revealed sooner and she would have a chance to sacrifice herself before she ended up in prison. "You had permission to enter The King's Library?" asks Serena.

"No," Arista emits a high-pitched laugh. "Which is why I'm here." Arista circles Serena, slowly. "Well, that and absconding." She makes a full circle around Serena, then stops in front of her.

Serena sighs. "So I've been told. Look, I have to go. Is there any way at all I can get out of here?"

"Sure," Arista shrugs. "If you can manage to smooth-talk one of the guards. Though obviously that hasn't done me any good—and I've had *a lot* of practice."

Serena forces a polite smile. "How often do they come?"

"So far, they've been here 7,310 times." Arista gestures to one side of the cave. Serena squints, but still can't see anything.

Arista sighs, and swims toward the wall, allowing more of her hair to light up. Just above the surface of the water are tick marks. The highest are within arm's reach. Serena swims closer to study them. The tick marks have different slants to them, and they are various heights. One is a squiggly line, appearing over and over again, almost in pattern.

"The tide doesn't come into the mountain this far," Arista explains. "And there is no moonlight. The only medium I have to judge the passing of time is the guard visits. They follow a pretty frequent pattern," Arista traces the etchings with her fingertips as she talks. "Each type of line represents a different guard."

"Who is that one?" Serena points to the squiggly line.

"Serena?" a distant voice shouts out, moving down the spiral corridors.

Swimming out to just under the hole in the ceiling, Serena waits. Arista floats alongside Serena on her back, her arms stretched out to the side like a lazy stingray. "Here he comes now…"

Serena doesn't look at Arista. Instead, she keeps her gaze on the constellation of Poseidon, staring down at Serena with judgmental eyes.

The reflection of Undine hair against the wall starts small in a corner, growing as the voice gets louder.

"Serena!" Kai's call rings down.

"Kai!" Serena yells back. "Get me out of here!"

Poseidon disappears completely, replaced by Kai's sea-green eyes. "Are you okay?" he yells, fingers curling over the edges of the opening.

Serena allows her own hair to illuminate so Kai can see her. "Yes, I'm fine. Please, just get me out of here."

"I'm sorry," he shakes his head. "I can't do that."

Serena grits her teeth, squeezing her hands into fists. Arista swims by on the other side, propelling herself with her fins. "Told you…" she sings to Serena.

"Why?" asks Serena, trying to ignore Arista.

"Because you'll go straight for The Dry, you'll sacrifice yourself—you've said as much."

"Kai—I need to be there. Please trust me on this."

"Well this is more entertainment than I've had in a long time," says Arista.

Kai looks down with a wry smile. "Hi, Arista."

Arista responds by diving under, then out again with a showy double summersault. She doesn't reach the ceiling by even one quarter of the distance. Serena could never make that jump, not even with a triple pike.

Serena turns away from the splash, then looks up at Kai, her shoulders sagging. "Is this how you imagine me waiting for you? In a prison?"

"I'll come for you, Serena. But we need to finish this first. I'm sorry…" his face disappears from view.

"Kai?" Serena shouts. "Kai, don't walk away!"

But the glow recedes, quicker than it did with the other guards, and the image of Poseidon returns. Serena hangs her head, then swims to a small ledge just under the surface of the water. Pulling herself onto it, she keeps her fins but curls her tail into her chest, wrapping her arms around herself.

There is no tide here, no moon, and no sun. Only the sea god himself to keep watch over the prisoners. Serena thinks of the sun, slowly disappearing on the other side of the globe. The next time it makes its appearance, the Undine will be at war.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Serena—Serena wake up!"

Someone is pulling at Serena's fins. Serena blinks, rubbing her hands over scratchy eyes. For a moment, she expects the smell of seaweed soup to drift in from the kitchen, and mother Rayne to poke her head in Serena's sleeping cove.

Serena opens her eyes to find Arista swimming back and forth in front of the ledge, agitated. Reality sets in, pressing down on Serena, weighing more than a thousand scrutinizing eyes.

"The guards haven't been back yet," says Arista. "I mean, I can't say they are late, because I don't know. But it's been a long time, and it just feels wrong."

"I know," says Serena, sitting up and swinging her legs into the water. "They are going to battle."

Arista stops swimming, turning to stare. "With who?"

"The werewolves," says Serena, glancing up at the only escape to the abyss. Poseidon is still there, standing guard.

"That," says Arista. "Is a very bad idea."

Serena snorts. "Tell me about it." She scoots off the ledge, dipping under the water then up again, fully awake. "Is there anything to eat in here?"

"Cave sponges," says Arista. "They grow along the bottom of the pool."

Serena's mouth turns down in distaste.

Arista shrugs. "It's no salted kelp, but you get used to them. Besides, every now and then you get lucky and find one infested with worms."

Serena puts the back of her hand to her mouth. Filleted salmon is starting to sound very good right about now.

"You know what?" Arista says. "I'm going to find you a sponge right now. It'll be like a welcoming present."

Serena nods, just so Arista won't mention the worms again. Once she dives under, Serena brings her hands to her temples.

I have to get out of here.

"Psst, Serena!" A voice calls down from the hole.

Serena doesn't hesitate to swim over and look up. Light blonde hair hangs down from the hole, framing a familiar face.

"Cordelia? What are you doing here?"

"I brought her," Sasha appears in the hole next to Cordelia, her bright orange scales casting a sickly glow on Poseidon's expression. Sasha throws over a long strand of material strung together. Tassels hanging from the bottom skim the surface of the water.

"The rug from your cave!" Serena exclaims, elation hitting her voice.

"I know—mom is going to be so upset. Come on, can you climb up?"

Serena grabs hold of the rug, then slips off.

"Try again," encourages Cordelia.

A second attempt is no more successful.

"It's too slippery," says Serena.

"Wrap it around your leg and we'll pull you up," hisses Sasha. She is getting impatient. They lower more of the makeshift rope into the abyss.

Serena goes under, transforms from fins to legs and begins looping the rope around her leg in a spiral from thigh to ankle. She glances around the darkened water. Arista is nowhere to be found.

Resurfacing, Serena shouts up. "Ready!"

Cordelia nods, then their faces disappear momentarily. Serena puts one foot on top of the other, keeping pressure on the rope in between them. She is heaved up in one big jolt, then again. The smile on her face grows wider as the hole gets bigger.

Suddenly, Serena is pulled back down. Her feet dip into the water. Glancing beneath her, she sees Arista latching onto the rope.

"I'm going with you," Arista says.

Serena shakes her head. "I don't think—"

Arista pulls again, and Serena is face to face with her.

Her eyes burn into Serena. "I go or no one goes."

"Serena?" Sasha yells down. "What happened?" Faces peer out over the ledge. "Who is that?"

Cordelia whispers to Sasha, and recognition dawns on her face. "Oh."

"She's coming, too," Serena decides. "Can you pull us both up?"

"I don't think that is such a good idea," says Cordelia.

"She's in here for a crime similar to mine—and she's been down here," Serena glances at the tick marks on the wall, "a very long time. If I am afforded the opportunity to leave—she goes too."

Arista meets Serena's eyes. *Thank you,* she mouths.

Serena nods and looks back up. "We are running out of time!"

The rope moves again, pulling both of them up. Water drips from their bodies as they are yanked higher and higher. Serena releases the rope with one of her hands, and grabs the ledge, pulling the rest of the way through on her own strength. Arista snakes out of the hold on the opposite side of the circle.

Cordelia and Simone release the rope, breathing hard.

"Thank you," says Serena. Looking from one to another. "But why are you helping me?"

"I want to fight, too," says Sasha. "And I figure if I show up with the next heir—they can't deny me again."

"I don't know," says Serena. "If something were to happen to you…"

"Please?" asks Sasha. "Do this one thing for me. We can call it my Choosing gift."

Understanding lights Serena's eyes. Sasha is calling in the favor she gave to Serena in the archives, when Sasha was willing to cover for her leaving under Ervin's guard.

Not to mention she did just break me out of prison.

"As you say," Serena sighs. She walks to the side of the cavern to pick up her armor and trident. She shrugs her armor back on, looking at Cordelia. "Will you be joining us, too?"

"No," Cordelia shakes her head, glancing down at her feet, then at Sasha.

Sasha gestures toward Serena. "Go on, tell her."

"Tell me what?" Serena asks, tightening the straps on her breastplate and ensuring the special arrow Ronan gave her is still there.

"I'm pregnant," blurts out Cordelia.

Serena's mouth drops open. "Oh…"

Cordelia blushes, her cheeks going the color of her scales. She rubs her elbow with one hand, looking away.

"I mean." Serena licks her lips. "Congratulations?"

"Thanks," Cordelia mumbles.

Serena thinks of Cordelia singing to a swaddled doll.

"How do you know that you are? I mean, isn't it too early to know?" Serena glances at Cordelia's midsection.

"Hailey tested me. I'm the only one that tested positive." Cordelia gives a nervous laugh. "I think some of the other girls are relieved."

Serena glances at Cordelia's midsection again. The deep burgundy color looks shinier than usual. She wonders if the calfling will don Cordelia's burgundy or Ervin's pale brown. Maybe it is bad luck to think of things like that.

"This is what you wanted, right?" Serena asks.

"All my life," says Cordelia. She smiles briefly and looks at the floor. "But…"

Serena prods Cordelia. "But what?"

Cordelia shrugs. "It's just…what if I can't give birth, because of the wolves?"

The cavern goes quiet. Even Arista, who has so far been exploring the walls with her hands, stops to look at Cordelia, then Serena.

"I need the beaches," says Cordelia. "I need my baby to be safe. And I think you have a better chance than any to make it happen." Cordelia tentatively steps forward, wraps her arms around Serena and squeezes tight.

Serena stiffens in the hug, unsure of what to do. She would've never expected this display of affection from Cordelia, much less toward the outcast of Society. A second pair of arms wrap around Serena and Cordelia, and Serena looks up to find Arista joining in, a wide grin on her face.

Clearing her throat, Serena shifts on her feet. The two maidens take the hint and release Serena.

"Well, have fun with your battle," Arista tips her head at Serena. She looks at Cordelia, her eyes drifting down to her midsection. "And the baby."

Cordelia put her hands over her stomach.

"And thanks for the release. I'll see you maidens later." Arista heads toward the sloped spiral leading out. Her bioluminescent tresses are the only ones still glowing, highlighting paintings that watch as she leaves.

"Should we stop her?" asks Sasha.

Serena shakes her head. "No time for that. We need to get to the surface." The urgency to get to the battle overcomes an uneasy sense of foreboding.

The last of the light disappears down the corridor, and the cavern goes dark. Poseidon's glowing eyes return, and Serena can swear he is frowning this time.

"Oh, stop judging," she hisses at him.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

After leaving Cordelia behind in the Great Hall, Serena and Sasha swim to the surface. A large group of maidens wait in the deep water with their bows and arrows before the waves crest and break onto Cliff beach. Half of them don't even have quivers, the arrows are tied to their hips with torn fabric.

Serena looks at Sasha, then gestures to the archers.

Sasha shakes her head. She holds out her arms and turns around, showing she has no bow. Instead, Sasha digs into the satchel tied around her waist, and pulls out a short, rusty knife.

Serena's shoulders sag. Sasha wants to be with the reinforcements, and judging from the fire in her eyes, there will be no convincing her otherwise. They swim wide around the archers, approaching the breakers where the second wave stands in wait. Serena turns to Sasha, pointing with her finger. *Stay here.*

Sasha nods, looking at the rows of maidens with their backs to her. If she stays in the rear, hopefully they won't notice until it is too late to send her away. Sasha tightens her grip on the stunted knife and swallows so hard Serena can see a lump move down her throat.

Edging closer, Serena puts her hand on Sasha's shoulder, imitating Murphy's warrior salute. Serena smiles, and mouths the words, *be careful.*

Sasha blinks, passing the knife to her other hand in order to return the salute. *Always am,* she mouths back.

Nodding, Serena releases the salute and backs away. She has to force herself to turn away, resisting the urge to drag Sasha all the way back to the lower caves to dump the innocent maiden in the abyss, just to protect her. Serena blinks, finally seeing some reason to Zayla's punishment and even Kai's refusal to help.

Serena tilts her chin down, streamlining to swim faster. Time to fight her first battle of the day, earning a position alongside the King's Guard. Hopefully they'll have no option but to let her stay. She finds the first wave of fighters huddled behind boulders at the next beach over— Forest Beach.

They take turns poking their heads out from behind the large rocks to scout the shoreline, where at least a dozen werewolves patrol.

The pink sky tells Serena the sun is rising, but at the opposite end of the Earth. For now, the beach and forest are shrouded in shadows.

Seagulls call out, announcing the coming of the sun. They glide over the shoreline, searching for breakfast. Serena is in luck, this flock is full of black-legged kittiwake seagulls—one of the few seagulls that dive. On cue, rays of light creep forward, warming the ocean as the sun rises over the treetops.

It is time. Serena faces The Dry, withdrawing an arrow from the quiver on her back. Then she turns the case around so it is aerodynamic as she swims. She only gets the one arrow for now. It needs to be on target.

She turns and swims forward under the shadow of a seagull. Following the crisscross pattern as the gull slowly angles toward the shore, Serena keeps a close watch on the bird, trying to anticipate its movements. The wolves that patrol on the sand won't be able to see her coming closer, at least not yet.

When the earth below begins to angle up, Serena pulls a fish from her pouch. She holds it in front of her as she swims, just below the surface of the water. The gull cocks his head, peering at the bait. Wings tuck in, preparing to dive.

Below, Serena streamlines her fins, preparing to jump. It happens so quickly, you wouldn't see it unless you were staring right at the bird. It dives for the bait, and Serena lifts herself from the water. For a split second, as the bird dives under, it's form is replaced with Serena's silhouette, elbows out mimicking wings. She pulls back on her bow and releases the arrow before she falls back under.

By now, the King's Guard will have noticed her, but the other wolves will have also noticed their fallen comrade. Serena stops to turn her quiver over for another arrow, then waits for the next bird. It doesn't take long, more of the flock moves closer at the promising prospect for food. She finds another shadow and when she is close enough, she holds out her bait, leaps up and releases another arrow. This time, Serena sees the guards creeping toward the shore, hidden in their own shadows.

Serena smiles. Murphy is taking advantage of the opportunity. The wolves on the beach are busy scanning the breakers for the threat, whining and anxious over an enemy they cannot see.

One more bird, thinks Serena, scanning the skies. She finds her fowl, and follows under its shadow. Her third wolf falls with an arrow to the neck. Serena doesn't hide back under the surface. She floats at the top, watching the guards close in on the rest of the pack. Kai and Murphy lead the charge. Against the enemy, they are quick, strong, and are surprisingly good countering werewolf claws and teeth. Serena reminds herself this isn't the first time the guard has fought the wolves.

Her eyes flit to Ervin, who was just sent sprawling across the sand with claw marks raked across his chest.

Well, maybe his first time.

Several guards come to Ervin's rescue, spearing his attacker through with their tridents. By the time the wolf has wheezed out his last breath, Serena's feet hit the sand as she walks out of the surf, shedding the salty seawater from her scales.

Kai walks toward her, and she braces herself for a fight. His breastplate is splattered in werewolf blood. Serena follows the drops down his arm to his hand that holds the three arrows she fired, already pulled from her victim's bodies.

Her eyes shoot back to his. He stalks toward her with long strides, shoulders heaving slightly forward in coordination with the opposite leg.

"What are you doing? How did you get out?" Kai hisses, scanning the surf as if the answer lies there.

Serena narrows her eyes. "You're welcome."

"You need to go back," he grabs her at the arm. "You can't be here. If Alaric finds you—"

Twisting her arm out of Kai's grasp, she glares up at him. "Are you going to throw me in the pit yourself, this time?"

"Now? We are going to do this now?" Kai looks at her from underneath thick eyebrows.

"As you say," Serena hisses through gritted teeth.

Kai growls. "We don't have time for this."

Serena waits as Kai starts to pace the beach, looking from his guards recovering from the fight, to the shadows retreating farther into the tree line as the sun rises.

Murphy steps in front of Kai, forcing him to halt his agitated pacing. "You are right—we don't have time for this. We don't know if one of them warned others, and we'll never win a fight on this open beach. We have to

draw them over to Cliff Beach where we can control their entry, and where our reinforcements wait." Murphy turns to Serena. "Besides, I have a feeling she is going to do this anyway. She is as stubborn as the king." He winks at her, then turns back to Kai. "She'll be safer with us."

"Fine," Kai sighs, turning toward Serena. He reaches up, her arrows in his hand, and Serena braces herself for his arms to envelope her in order to place the weapons in her quiver, like he did in the armory.

Instead, Kai grabs her at the shoulders and turns her. Serena almost topples over at the rough movement. He shoves the arrows in her quiver and turns her back around before she has had a chance to catch her balance.

He leans in, fiery eyes pinning her to the spot. "You stay close to me and Murphy—but I want you in the trees."

A sharp, ear-piercing howl rings through the forest, cutting straight through Serena's heated core, leaving only ice in its wake. All Undine heads turn toward the sound.

"All right," says Murphy, turning toward Serena. "We may be facing more than fur and fangs alone. The wolves are integrated into Ungainly life, more so than us, anyway, and they may have Ungainly weapons."

Kai is tightening the straps around Serena's armor. "They pack a powerful punch. And have a farther range than arrows, but they can't penetrate our incandescent scales—only their fangs are thin enough to do that."

"That's comforting," mumbles Serena. She glances from Kai, to Murphy, then to Ervin joining the group brushing sand from the scrapes across his chest.

"You got new tridents," she notices. The weapons aren't nearly as intricate as Serena's, but they look sturdy enough. She hopes they've had time to practice with them. The one dozen bodies on the beach tell her they have. Her eyes pause on Ervin.

Has Cordelia told him she's with child? Would it make him fight harder, or would he be distracted?

Serena can't think of that now. Hopefully, Cordelia knows him well enough to make the right choice between telling him or not.

Serena looks at Kai, heat from their argument dissolving as he inspects the rest of her gear for faults. Already the large, uncomfortable breastplate feels more secure. "Are we really about to do this?" she whispers to him.

He turns, squaring his body with hers, and nods. "We'll be okay. And when this is all over, you can enlighten me on how to properly court a maiden of the throne," he winks at Serena.

Serena smiles back. "Your guess is as good as mine—or better, probably."

They both turn to Murphy. He gestures to the trees. "Alright warriors of the guard, and…Serena. Let's go."

The column, spread out in one staggered line, moves forward. Serena calls forth more of her natural armor. Midnight-blue, diamond-shaped plates crawl up as far as her neck, extending to her chin and trickling out over her cheekbones until they look like permanent splashes of water across her expression. Besides her head and the exposed parts of her face, the only unprotected spot is her toe, where wolfsbane poison has left its mark.

Serena grimaces, longing for the yellow-petal shield she is so used to hiding behind. There will be no wolfsbane in this battle, the wolves made sure of that. Her grip tightens on her trident. Forged in the spiritual fires of the armory and blended with Undine ancestors flesh and bone, the weapon is more than a sufficient replacement to the poisonous flower.

Her feet take long strides across Forest Beach and she finds herself scanning the lot of dead bodies for the crescent moon-shaped birthmark, but doesn’t find one. Liam isn't here.

By the time the next breaker hits the shore, the first wave of Undine have disappeared into the trees.

Chapter Forty

Serena runs with the King's Guard. There is no more formation. Here they must stick to the shadows and avoid any altercations until they get deep enough into the forest to draw the entire pack out. There is the occasional werewolf that must be brought down, but casualties are minimal and their bodies are hauled to the trees, hopefully to remain concealed.

Serena spots a low branch. She hands Murphy her trident, and leaps, pulling herself up. Kai and Murphy pause to watch. They cannot follow her, their extra weight too much for the thinner branches to handle.

Murphy tosses her trident up to her and the trio continue to move forward. Serena glides through the trees like a soundless bird, with Murphy and Kai clinging to her shadow below. Ahead, she spots a cluster of men. Some are in Ungainly form, some in wolf form.

More groups of werewolves are spread throughout the area. They have made their own barrier. Any farther and the Undine might reach Ungainly roads and settlements. This is where they will make their stand. She makes a low click in her throat, giving warning to Murphy and Kai.

Serena leaps higher into the next tree and finds a solid crook where branch meets trunk. She removes each arrow from her quiver, laying them in a row in front of her. Up high, leaves obscure some of the view, but her skill with the bow has improved quickly—even more so than her skill with the trident.

The forest goes quiet in the cold, early hours of the morning. Huddled around fires, even the wolves settle into silence. Their backs face the threat and tired eyes stare at flames, but Serena can see ears flatten against their heads, listening. It is the calm before the storm.

Serena takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. She has to force her arms to relax, pushing all thoughts of the king and the prison out of her head. She thinks of Cordelia and her hymn. Serena imagines Cordelia singing not to a doll, but to an actual swaddled Undine calfling, the first in eighteen years.

To her left, the sound of a twig snapping in two breaks the silence. All heads turn toward Ervin, werewolf and Undine alike. Through the twisted branches, littered with leaves, Serena can see his eyes go wide. He

probably misjudged his steps. If he hasn't self-corrected his awkward gait in the water by now, it would only be exaggerated in The Dry.

There is a brief pause and then a sudden flurry of action. Many werewolves begin their transformation, the sound of bones popping out of joints resonating throughout the forest like the echo of the snapping twig. Those already in wolf form sprint toward Ervin.

An arrow whistles from treetop to ground, burying its pointed tip deep into the wolf's brain through his ear. The lead wolf is dead before his head hits the ground. He skids to a stop at Ervin's feet.

Serena lowers her bow, nocking the next arrow.

Another wolf nudges his dead comrade with his snout. There is a whine that morphs into a growl. More wolves join in with their own growl and half the pack turns toward Serena's tree.

The enemy divides, giving Serena the chance to loose one more arrow and help Ervin. When it, too, hits its mark, she tries not to think which maiden's son it is. At the base of her tree, Kai and Murphy flourish their tridents, revealing their presence in order to force the wolf pack to split even further. Serena moves out on her limb so she can keep both guards in her view.

Closer to Ervin, she can spot two more guards jumping into the trees. They begin felling werewolves around Ervin with their arrows even before their feet hit the solidity of the branch. A growl draws her attention back to Kai. Two wolves are closing in on him. As they leap, Kai hits one square in the jaw with the stem of his trident. There is no time to defend against the other wolf and its claws dig into Kai's chest, knocking him back. They both roll—fur, scales, fur, scales—moving out of Serena's sight.

"Kai!" Breath catching in her throat, Serena follows, leaping to a lower branch. Out of the corner of her eye she can see Murphy dealing with two more himself.

Murphy can handle it, she tells herself. *He has to. Kai needs my help.*

Kai and his wolf are still rolling. Serena nocks an arrow. Behind her, Murphy throws a wolf off him, directly into the trunk of her tree. The tree shakes right as Serena looses an arrow toward Kai's wolf. Her aim is thrown off and the arrow shoots harmlessly into the ground next to the dueling pair.

Damn it, thinks Serena. She has to make every arrow count.

One more roll and Kai is on the bottom. His hand reaches out, grabbing the arrow Serena shot. The wolf rears up, gaining momentum for a thrust straight at Kai's throat. Serena freezes, all too aware of how it feels to be pinned beneath a werewolf.

Kai jams the arrowhead straight into the side of the wolf's neck. The dog goes limp. Arms shaking, Serena jumps down from the tree. She helps pull at the beast, rolling it off Kai.

Serena glances at the dead wolf's snout—no crescent moon.

"What are you doing?" Kai asks, his eyes skipping around the forest.

"You're welcome—again," says Serena.

He shakes his head, pulling the arrow from the wolf's neck and handing it back to her. "This isn't a competition," he says.

"Right, but if it was—I'd win," Serena takes the arrow from Kai and replaces it in her quiver.

A small smile lifts the corners of his mouth. He steps toward Serena, pulling a leaf from her hair. "Just stay close, okay?"

She nods but before she can say anything a lone howl echoes through the forest. Most of the fighting stops as the wolves turn. Many of the Undine cover their ears. It is bone-rattling, reminding Serena of Murphy's signal underwater. But this one sends shivers down her spine, and she knows it is Alaric.

The howl stops and the wolves turn back to their enemy. They stand taller and move slower, with more confidence.

"What was that all about?" whispers Kai. His hand goes to Serena's arm like a leash.

"A call," says Serena, remembering Alaric's howl when she was spying on the camp, "for reinforcements."

Chapter Forty-One

"Move!" shouts Kai, pushing Serena toward Cliff Beach.

He is insistent, practically wrapping himself around her as she runs. She has just enough time to turn and shout. "Murphy!"

Murphy thrusts his trident into the chest of a wolf. He looks up and nods. Whistling, first to his left then his right, he signals the other guards to move toward the beach.

Feet pound against the ground in sync, the rhythm growing louder when Murphy joins in. They settle into a pace, Serena slightly ahead while Murphy and Kai flank her. She looks at Kai. His eyes ablaze with determination but his forehead is creased with worry. He still thinks she might give herself up.

And I will, Serena tells herself. *If we can't fight our way out of it together.*

Serena's toes sink into soft, moss-covered ground, then catch on tangled weeds. She trips, falling forward fast. Her outstretched hands catch her before her face hits rock. A whoosh of heavy air goes straight above her head. She looks up and the long hairs of a werewolf's underside brush her nose.

Murphy and Kai turn to face their own attacking wolves. The trio are surrounded by a group of five. Serena gets to her feet, grasping her trident, holding it in front of her. Glancing to her left and right, she tries to mimic the powerful, confident stance of the King's Guard. Feet wide, shoulders squared, and trident at an angle. With a strong posture, her confidence grows.

Kai and Murphy side step, shifting so they each face two wolves, leaving her with only one. Serena looks at her opponent. He is bigger than Liam in his wolf form, and his eyes keep flitting to the wolves on either side of him. He is following their lead and isn't nearly as confident.

The dance begins. Kai bends, sending one wolf over the entire group with the stem of his trident. Murphy leaps forward, clashing with his opponent in midair. When they hit the ground, they are already tangled together in a ball of scales and fur.

Serena has more time. Her wolf starts forward, as if he is about to lunge, but then pauses, circling her. She continues to wait, keeping on the balls of her feet. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Murphy wrap his thick arms around one wolf's neck, using his trident as more leverage.

Serena's wolf uses the distraction to his advantage. He leaps toward her, claws extended. His growl seems to stick in his throat, as if he doesn't really mean it. Serena lunges, spinning just out of reach of his paw. She puts all her momentum behind her trident, flattening out the tips and slamming down on the wolf's head as they pass each other. His jaw absorbs the impact of the ground, and his body follows. Disoriented and vulnerable, he struggles to get to his feet.

Serena cannot bring herself to deliver another blow. She steps away, breathing hard, allowing the wolf the same hesitation he gave her. As she brings her trident to her side, another trident pierces through the back of her wolf's neck, pinning him to the earth.

Serena bites down on her fist to keep from screaming, or gagging, or both. She looks up into Murphy's cold eyes.

"He'd of done the same to you as soon as he had the chance," Murphy says.

Serena shakes her head. "He did have the chance."

Murphy isn't paying attention. He is already looking to the ocean. They are almost there, but the wolves are descending again. Murphy pulls an arrow from his quiver and nocks his bow.

Serena puts a hand on his arm to stop him. "You aren't calling for reinforcements are you?" Her forehead crinkles with worry. If the King's Guard can't survive this, neither can the reinforcements.

Murphy gestures to the blue ribbons hanging off the end of the arrow. "Just looking for some interference to give us an edge."

He shoots, and the arrow flies out from the forest. There is nothing for the span of a breaker, and then a different kind of sound rips through the air. Serena steps back as a fish whizzes between the pair of them. She smiles up at Murphy.

"Come on," he says.

Before they can run again, another pair of wolves move to either side of the trio. Kai and Murphy lunge forward, Serena staggers back, frightened by the Undine's ferocity. The flurry of metal, prongs, fur, and fangs gives Serena no opportunity to step in and help.

"Serena!"
She freezes, then turns toward the familiar voice.

Chapter Forty-Two

Liam is one of the few of the clan Werich in his human form. Serena does not let that fool her—he is still just as dangerous. Kai and Murphy fight for their lives, and it looks as though they are being drawn away.

Narrowing her eyes in distrust, Serena turns to Liam.

"I didn't want this," Liam says. He is breathing hard, his clothes covered in dirt. Serena scrutinizes his bruised face and bleeding lip.

"Yet you've been fighting anyway," she says.

His fists clench shut, then open again.

"Are you about to change?" Serena asks, taking a step back. She glances at Kai.

He is too far away.

"Our transformation happens whenever the Undine fear level spikes, whether there is a full moon or not. Some have better control over others —"

"Those with certain bloodlines, like you?" asks Serena.

"Yes, but the wolf is always difficult to suppress. That is why I changed whenever you almost fell off the cliff." Liam falls to his knees, hunched over, then takes a deep breath and stands again, like he is battling an inner demon.

Tightening her grip around the stem of her trident, her palms squeak against the metal. She looks around, the King's Guard is hopelessly outnumbered.

Serena shakes her head, narrowing her gaze at Liam. "Why did you burn the wolfsbane?"

"It was Alaric; I couldn't stop him." Liam runs his hand through his hair.

Serena can see his fingernails extend out into sharp points, then go back to normal.

He continues, "I wasn't supposed to be talking to you. I thought I could change things…but Alaric sees a different path for our species."

Teeth elongate past his lips and Serena remembers them practically scraping at her neck the night of the cliffs. She shivers. "I don't trust you."

"You should. I am going to fix this."

"So am I," says Serena.

Liam shakes his head. "Alaric won't leave the Undine in peace, if you surrender. Even if you don't trust me—you can't trust him."

Another wolf approaches, ears flattened back, teeth bared at Serena. Liam turns, growling at him. The wolf's ears perk, then he tucks his tail between his legs and slinks around them.

Serena watches him go, then turns back to Liam. "We were the same species, once," she says. Her voice is low, almost a whisper.

Liam takes a step closer. "Listen—"

Serena lowers her trident, pointing it directly at his chest.

His eyes go wide. "Please, I need to tell you something."

Serena glances at Kai out of the corner of her eye. He is moving closer to her now. If she lets Liam close the distance, Kai might get distracted. She can't risk that. "You can tell me from there."

He swallows. "The night of the Maiden's Massacre—you don't know everything about it."

"What don't I know?" Serena presses forward so Liam has to step back.

He grips her trident just below the crescent moon that holds the three prongs and leans in until the tips puncture his bare chest. A small trickle of blood snakes its way down his exposed abdomen. "You weren't the only Undine to survive the Maiden's Massacre." Liam lowers his voice again. "One still lives."

Serena freezes, but her hesitation only lasts a second. She grits her teeth, and pushes her trident forward. Liam gives resistance, now gripping the weapon for leverage as he loses balance.

"Where?" Serena demands. The thought of one of her people in the clutches of Alaric is more maddening than watching the wolfsbane patch burn.

Liam shakes his head.

Serena grits her teeth. Drawing a small circle with the tip of the trident, she twists it out of his grasp. She swings it wide, rotating her hips. The stem connects with his temple. He stumbles back, barely keeping his footing as he falls against a tree. He puts his hand to his head. As soon as he pushes himself away from the tree, Serena throws her trident.

The three points spin in the air, but the stem follows a straight path, parallel to the ground. The center prong stabs through Liam's shoulder,

burying itself in the tree behind him. Liam is pinned. Another prong rests on top of his shoulder, and the third just outside of his bicep.

He opens his mouth, wide enough to scream, but he only manages to emit a strangled whine.

Serena stalks toward him, her stride long and quick. Her chin is tilted down, her glare so intense it could've pinned him better than the trident.

One side of her lip curls up in a snarl. "Where?"

"Serena—" Liam's mouth opens and closes, the shock of his wound cutting off his voice. "I am trying to help you!"

"Where. Is. She?" Serena asks again, each word rumbles in her throat. She grasps her trident and rotates it.

The few centimeters of give it has is enough, and Liam cries out. "Not a she!"

Serena steps away from the trident. "Who then?"

"It was me—I survived. I was one of the infants." He grunts in pain, sweat dripping down his pale face. "I am told that I had a twin," he looks at her, eyes pleading before they squint closed in agony again.

Serena's gaze drop to the crescent moon mark on the side of his face, remembering the birthmark on the king's nose. "I suppose you have an affinity with the moon, too?" she whispers.

"What?" his chest is heaving with shallow breaths.

Serena looks at him. Behind the blood, sweat, tense muscles, and deep lines in his face as he grimaces, is a touch of innocence. He doesn't know that Serena is his sister.

"Serena!"

She barely has time to register Kai's voice when she is knocked aside. She hits the ground hard, ribs slamming into a large rock.

Her breath catches in her throat and pain explodes down her side and around her back. Her gills spread open and she can feel her stomach spasm. Serena watches the wolf that slammed into her get back on his feet and she realizes she can't move her legs.

"Liam…" Serena manages to croak out, sitting up. She doesn't take her eyes off the wolf stalking toward her. She can only hope Liam is still conscious and can hear her. "I'm so sorry."

The wolf bares his teeth, lowering his head. Serena wiggles her fingers, keeping her breathing shallow to minimize the pain.

"Me, too." Liam's voice is raspy and distant.

The wolf leaps, his mouth opening. He covers the distance quickly and slams into Serena's chest, knocking her down. She feels his hot breath push against her exposed neck.

This is it, Serena thinks. *Nothing will matter after this. Not the king, not Liam, not even Kai's kisses.* She stretches her neck long, hoping it will be quick.

Before fangs tear into her, there is the sharp zing of metal against teeth.

Looking up through the spaced prongs of a trident, and long, matted hair on the wolf, Serena sees Kai. She blinks, her lips forming the words *thank you*. In the next second, another blur of fur slams into Kai, and he is gone.

Chapter Forty-Three

"Kai!" Her scream is shrill and desperate. She thrashes on the ground under the wolf pinning her down. Her muscles give in to pure exhaustion, and Serena goes limp as she stares up into wild, red eyes. The wolf grabs Kai's trident with his teeth and tosses it aside before turning back to Serena.

She can move now, but has no weapon. She hears Liam struggling against the tree, but her trident holds strong. With her arrows trapped in between the ground and her back, she is out of options. Saliva drips from the wolf's mouth, pinging as it hits her breastplate.

Serena remembers her secret weapon; the miniature arrow fastened to her front. Before the next drop of saliva falls from the wolf's fangs, she grabs the arrow. Her hand is at an awkward angle, but she can't risk losing the chance. She jams the flint directly into the wolf's throat and blood splatters her face and the ground around her.

She sits up, pushing on the wolf with one hand and pulling on her treasured last weapon with the other. She has just enough time to turn the arrow for a better grasp and thrust it out in front of her, killing another wolf that attacks. It falls to the other side of her.

Screams ricochet across the forest when one of the guards fall under a small pack of frenzied wolves. And yet, more wolves are coming.

Serena gets to her feet, walks to Liam, and wraps her hands around her trident. One hard and quick pull, and the trident slides out of Liam's shoulder. He falls to his knees, clutching the wound.

"Liam!" she shakes him. His eyes roll to the back of his head, and he slumps to the ground, unconscious.

The blood isn't seeping as bad, and his breathing is becoming steadier.

His pack will take care of him, right?

Serena turns, searching for Kai. A wolf stands over him, shaking his head violently back and forth.

"Not him!" she yells, running toward Kai and grabbing his trident left stranded in the shrubbery. She approaches the mass of fur standing over

him, her eyes tearing up before she can reach him. Her system has gone into pure panic.

Straddling over the wolf, she drops Kai's trident, and grasps her own with two hands. She raises it up, then thrusts down. The center prong skips off the spine. The wolf yelps, bucking his hind legs out. Serena keeps him pinned in place and thrusts her trident down again. All three spikes spear flesh. The wolf goes still with shallow, wheezing breaths. Serena pulls her trident out, blood matting the fur around the puncture wounds. Another thrust punches through more flesh, and the wolf stops breathing.

She swings one leg off, pivots, and kicks out. The wolf falls to the side, and Kai is splayed out on the ground, blood covering his torso.

Serena kneels next to him. "Kai!"

Her hands feel useless. There is so much red, she doesn't even know where to apply pressure. Kai is gurgling, and a small stream of blood trickles out of his mouth.

"No, no." Serena shakes her head. "You said you'd wait for me. Don’t go!"

He lifts up his head. "Until my last breath."

"It won't come this night, Kai Forest." Tears run down her cheeks. "It won't."

"Oh, no," Murphy says, kneeling on the other side of Kai.

Recalling a quick explanation from Murphy during a training session on colored arrows and their codes, Serena reaches into his quiver and pulls out the arrow with red ribbons attached.

"No…don't!" Murphy shouts.

She nocks, aims toward the beach, and releases the arrow.

"Shit." Murphy watches the arrow disappear out over the ocean. It's distinct buzzing sound and the red, flapping ribbons will call in reinforcements.

She kneels back down next to Kai, looking at Murphy. "I had to."

It is not so much the reinforcements that Serena longs for than it is Hailey, the healer, and her assistants.

She looks down at Kai. "He needs them."

There is another howl, spurring Serena to her feet. "Just how many reinforcements do *they* have?"

If any more waves move in, this day could very well see off the last of the Undine.

"We need to get him to the beach," Murphy says, hooking one of his arms underneath Kai.

Serena nods, doing the same on the other side.

They half-run, half-walk to Cliff Beach, dragging Kai through the forest then into the narrow passageway, hard rock scraping at both their shoulders. Serena's webbed feet finally hit sand as they emerge from the trail. She looks at the breakers. The first Undine reinforcements are also coming onto the beach. Serena searches for Hailey's blue-green scales.

All she sees are scared, wide eyes. They look to Serena and Murphy for instruction, but there is no time for orders. Right behind them, werewolves emerge from the passageway.

Serena and Murphy drop Kai. Murphy moves forward, ready to intercept as many wolves as he can. Serena stands over Kai, planting her trident into the sand, deep enough so it stands on its own. She draws from her quiver and drops two werewolves coming her way.

But more filter out of the passageway, leaping over their dead brethren. Scattering across the beach, the wolves turn their full fury on the innocent maidens.

Serena watches in horror as the first of the wolves slams into a maiden with orange scales—Sasha.

The wolf tears into her soft middle. Orange scales dot the sand around her like blood splatter. All Undine seem to pause on the beach, equally unable to process and react to the scene. Sasha's screams don't last long. They die out as a wave reaches up, lightly touching the splayed out strands of her hair. Then the tide recedes, taking her soul with it.

The wolf turns to a group of stunned maidens.

Serena is finally able to nock an arrow and take aim. Beside her, Murphy continues to ward off attack after attack, keeping the wolves at bay, away from Serena and Kai. She tries to block out the growls and grunts occurring a few feet from her. As she is about to let loose her arrow, Murphy stumbles back and crashes into Serena.

She ducks as the rest of his bulky body summersaults over her, then she stands, releasing her arrow at the attacking wolf instead. The carcass slumps to the ground at her feet.

Serena looks back at the maidens, who stare at the wolf in front of them. The creature is aiming for another maiden—Lilly, the garden apprentice.

No, Serena thinks, stepping forward side by side with Murphy, who has regained his footing. An advancing trio of wolves distract them. Out of arrows, Serena drops her bow and picks up her trident. She and Murphy stand back to back, surrounded by werewolves once again. The enemy attacks. Murphy and Serena alternate turns parrying, thrusting, ducking, and blocking fangs and claws.

Serena risks a glance at Lilly, who kicks a clump of sand at the wolf. Her webbed feet scoop up plenty of granules. The wolf backs away, pawing at his eyes. This emboldens the rest of the maidens, and they inch forward, holding up their knives.

A flash of sea-green on sand catches Serena's eye. "Hailey!" she calls, waving her arms, then pointing to Kai lying on the ground.

"Can you stand guard?" Hailey asks as soon as she reaches Kai, already pulling vials from the pouch around her waist.

Serena nods. She faces her enemy with a new vigor alongside Murphy, yet more werewolves emerge from the passageway. Their ranks are as steady and plentiful as the waves. A lump rises in Serena's throat.

We need more help.

Together, Serena and Murphy thrust their tridents into another werewolf. Serena hits the midsection, twisting her weapon and ripping at his soft belly. His insides spill out onto the sand; revenge for the Sunbeam family and their fallen painted maiden. Murphy steps hard on the wolf's limp body so they can both remove their tridents.

Behind them, Serena hears Kai cough. She turns. When he opens his eyes, they skip around—wild in panic. Finally, they rest on her. He breathes, then lays his head back down.

"We need to get you back," Hailey says.

Kai shakes his head. "No, I'm staying."

"Kai, please—return to the waves," Serena pleads through heavy breaths.

Kai pushes himself up, looking at Hailey. "Can you wrap my wounds?"

Hailey glances at Serena once, then nods at Kai. "Of course." She begins digging in her pouch again.

Serena swallows hard, turning to face Kai. "Go back. That is an order."

Kai raises one eyebrow, along with his arms so Hailey can spin gauze around his midsection. "Last time I checked, the Werewolf Liaison doesn't outrank the Second in Command."

"Maybe not," says Serena. "But the Maiden Heir to the throne does."

"Serena…" Murphy's voice is strained.

She turns to find him holding his trident parallel to the ground. Two large wolves shove their full weight against it. When Murphy lifts it up, their chests are exposed. Serena thrusts her weapon into one of them. Murphy pushes forward, able to throw them both back.

Once she steadies herself, Serena turns, facing Kai. "Like I said, this night will not take your last breath from me. Go!"

"No." Kai takes his trident from Murphy. Her eyes scrutinize two sets of puncture holes across his body. One curves over his shoulder, the other spans his chest.

"Please?" she asks, voice soft.

He takes a step closer. "Can you guarantee you will return to me?"

Serena looks at the slow trickle of blood running down her trident, then out at the battle.

"No," she says.

Kai nods. "Then I'll have to stay to make sure of it." He takes position next to Serena, nodding to Murphy on the other side of her. Behind them, Hailey ties off Kai's wraps and slips away to help another fallen Undine.

Down the beach, Lilly and five other maidens withdraw their weapons from the hide of a downed wolf.

Just as the tides begin to turn, a fresh group of wolves arrive—led by Alaric. Serena grits her teeth at the howl he emits. But Alaric's call is answered by another. It is a deep rumble, moving in from the ocean. All eyes turn toward the water, Undine and wolf alike.

King Merrick sits on top of the whale rock, summoning the water. The sea obliges, rising up at his command.

Chapter Forty-Four

The king looms above the water. His multicolored scales glisten in the sunlight, lighting up the rock and the water that surrounds it like a rainbow. The king rides the arched kaleidoscope of colors like he has done it his entire life. Undine and werewolves alike stand transfixed. The wolves are prey to the first tidal waves that wash over the beach.

When it moves out, few of the wolves manage to escape. Many are drawn into deep water, where the second wave awaits. The water turns white with a frenzied panic as Undine attempt to drown the werewolves.

What is left of the wolf pack on the beach stare out, whining. They are powerless to do anything about it. Entering the water would just create more casualties. They all look to Alaric for direction. Another tidal wave comes, and Alaric himself backs away from it.

Murphy shouts, renewing the charge against the wolves. For the first time, numbers are almost in favor of the Undine. A few more waves might cinch their victory. On cue, the king sends another one. Serena launches herself toward a wolf, wrapping her arms around his neck. The wave washes over them both. They tumble over one another, and her arms unlock in the turmoil. She is determined to hang on to him. She reaches out with her legs, squeezing again around his neck. She transforms. Scales grow over her intertwined legs, and over his neck, helping to tighten the vise grip.

Her fins flutter and she drags him out to sea in a state of half-transformation, delivering the wolf to her people. As she comes back to shore she passes Ervin doing the same to another werewolf.

The temporary reprieve from the glaring sun, and the short jaunt in her own element reenergizes Serena. She uncrosses her limbs, and her feet hit sand. She rushes up to help Murphy and Kai.

Serena picks up her trident and knocks down a wolf before he can take Kai from the side. She keeps a wary eye out for Alaric, and Liam has yet to make another appearance.

The fighting grows more desperate from both sides, and more wolves continue to emerge from the forest.

Serena looks back at the king, frowning. What else can he do? He needs to get out of there. Already, the wolves that still survive in the water are paddling toward him. Hopefully the Undine in the water will help protect him.

A sharp crack echoes down the beach. Serena looks at Kai, eyes wide.

"Gun," he says. "Ungainly weapons—not good."

She looks to where she thinks the noise came from, but Kai is pointing in the other direction, directly at Ervin.

Bent over, Ervin holds his chest, seeming almost out of breath.

Serena starts toward him, but is blocked by another group of wolves.

Where are the waves when you need them?

Between exchanging blows with the wolves, she sees Ervin. When he takes his hand away, there is no blood. There is, however, a significant dent in his brown scales. The man holding the Ungainly weapon looks confused. He looks down, fiddling with the gun, then takes aim at Ervin again.

Serena fights harder to get through the wolves. Kai attempts to help her, but his trident is too easily knocked aside and his breathing is labored.

There is another crack. Ervin's shoulder is punched back and a few of his scales fly off. He stumbles in the sand and falls to his knees. As more Ungainly wolves are drawn to the weakened prey, two are spared to restrain Ervin. They hold on tight to his arms, and step on his legs, pinning them down.

The man narrows his eyes, stepping forward and raising the gun—this time directly against Ervin's forehead.

"Ervin!" Serena screams. She kicks out, using the same tactic Lilly did in desperation.

The wolves fighting Serena, temporarily blinded by sand, duck their heads. It doesn't help. Serena lunges to the side with her trident. The golden weapon slices through falling sand. Once, then twice, she stabs straight through the wolves' chests. Kai does the same with the third, though it isn't quite as precise. He leaves the wolf only wounded, not dead.

Before the last of the grain has fallen, Serena is through the maelstrom.

Crack.

Half of Ervin's face implodes. He falls forward, limp. Serena swings her trident in a wide arc over her head, gaining momentum. Her stem smashes into the side of one man's face, his temple cracking under the

blow. Another man closes his fist and punches out. She catches his arm in between the intertwining double stem of her trident. She rotates her entire weapon, forcing his body to follow his arm. As he falls, Serena retracts her weapon, grasping the stem with two hands. She thrusts down, straight into his neck, driving him the rest of the way to the ground.

A searing pain punches into her gut. She bends over, and looks up—straight into the barrel of the black, Ungainly weapon. It reminds her of the tunnel leading to the archives.

This is it, she thinks. *My path to the afterlife.* She can only hope it will be as heavenly as the archives.

Serena refuses to look away. She'll face her death head-on.

Chapter Forty-Five

Behind the barrel, Serena can see the man's knuckles go tight as he squeezes the trigger. Suddenly, the tunnel disappears as it is pushed down by a trident; Kai has caught up with Serena. The crack still comes. Only now, it is aimed at her toes.

The hit is a lucky one. It is the exact spot where wolfsbane once touched, no longer protected by her hardened scales. Her foot explodes in pain, quickly surpassing the ache in her belly. She falls to her knees, next to Ervin's body.

Over her head, she hears the whoosh of Kai's trident. It finishes the job for her, and the third man is dead.

Serena glances down, ignoring the pain in her foot. Running her palm over Ervin's outstretched hand, she shivers. His body is already growing cold.

I'm on the wrong side, she thinks. *I always swim on his left.*

She moves closer to him to kneel in the sand, facing out to the water.

Serena squeezes her eyes shut and opens her mouth, but a scream does not form. Instead, a song does. It is a low, guttural moan—a note for Ervin. She mourns the loss of her best friend, the loss of Cordelia's mate, and the loss of a father to his unborn calfling who will never know him.

Heads turn in Serena's direction.

She raises her pitch and adds a slow beat to her tempo. This note is for Sasha Sunbeam and her orange-scaled family. A maiden daughter lies dead, torn to pieces on the beach. The next note is for the rest of the carnage that greets Serena's eyes. Two more of the King's Guard also lie dead, one overwhelmed by a flurry of fang and claw, and one a victim of another Ungainly weapon. The colorful bodies of several more maidens pepper the beach. Bright yellow, coral pink, and deep rose sparkle in the sunlight. Serena sings for them, slowly standing, balancing most of her weight on her good foot.

She turns to the ocean, opening her mouth further. She sucks air in through her gills and pushes it out of her mouth. Her lips round, adding a soft whistle to her harmony. This note promises retribution. She calls to

the Undine still in the ocean and heads emerge from the deep blue water, answering her call.

The wolves on the beach stop, surveying their enemy. More Undine appear—even those that weren't enlisted for the battle.

Serena turns to the king, singing louder, encouraging the water to carry her voice all the way over to him. She works her throat, introducing new chords. The multiple shades that emerge pay homage to the rainbow of colors the king emits. All of the hues of the Undine Painted Maidens. He is the one true representative of their community, and Serena calls to him to stop this bloodshed.

He raises his massive trident in the air, acknowledging her call. Serena allows the last notes to leave her lips, then closes her mouth.

She can see the king work to manipulate the water once again.

This is it, she thinks. *He can save us all.*

Another tidal wave does not form. Instead, the water is pulled from the beach, and stays away.

The king continues to work. Serena squints, but can't understand what he is doing.

There is a growl down the beach—Alaric. Still in wolf form, he pushes three other wolves toward the water and they break into a run.

"Look at that," says Kai. He moves to stand next to Serena, breathing hard. "They think they can walk on water now?"

Serena's eyes go wide. "Oh, no."

"What?" asks Kai.

Serena's heart skips a beat in horror. Water splits, clearing a path straight to the whale rock, and the king.

"To the King!" Serena shouts, picking up Ervin's remaining arrows and jamming them into her own quiver.

The rest of Society catches on. Heads dip back below water as Undine swim to protect their monarch. Maidens closest to him jump out of the water at the wolves, running down the path of the parting ocean. There are several misses, but they manage to bring one down. The first wolf makes it to the whale rock. The king grips his trident; he will not make it easy for them.

He waits for the wolf to scramble up the steep, wet boulder. King Merrick lunges, trident aimed out. The wolf dodges, but slips. One quick flick of his trident and the king tosses the wolf into the water. The maidens

below are no longer fearful. They take the wolf by each limb, and swim in opposite directions, tearing him to pieces.

Alaric and another wolf, the largest of the pack, have reached the boulder. They leap toward the king in unison. He can't defend against them both.

Ahead, Murphy is already running. Those in the pack that still remain on the beach turn to intercept the charging Undine.

First Kai, then Serena, run to lend backup to Murphy and the other guards. In V-formation, like birds flocking to nesting grounds, the group plow their way through the werewolf obstacles. Slower with their injuries, Kai and Serena bring up the rear. Serena tucks her trident under her arm and draws an arrow.

She takes aim at the wolves who fight on the rock with the king and shoots. Her arrows hits water, a hundred feet too short. Kai tries. His lands closer, but still hits nothing but water.

They continue to run, each step sending a searing pain up Serena's leg. She leans more on her good foot, refusing to look down at the injury.

The king's movements slow, his long tail a hindrance on dry land. He can't turn and twist to fend off the attacks like he needs to.

It is like watching the king and Alaric through the shrubs all over again. Only this time, they are exchanging deadly blows instead of mere threats. She remembers something Alaric said.

Only one other sacrifice will satisfy the debt.

"No…" says Serena, lips rounded.

The king is sacrificing himself. He knows they won't win the battle, so he is taking the initiative before Serena does.

Serena runs harder, pushing Kai in front of her. He pushes those in front of him, and soon the entire formation speeds up.

It won't help, Serena tries to channel reason into the king. *He won't offer peace upon your death—he still needs a maiden.*

Serena tries her hand at another arrow. This one hits the base of the rock.

Just a little closer, she thinks, looking up at the king.

He has one wolf pinned to the rock in between the prongs of his trident. Behind him, Alaric circles.

All of Society can see it coming. There is a collective gasp. It should be enough to warn the king, but he doesn't turn. Instead, he looks up directly

at Serena. He holds one hand in the air toward her—his final farewell.

Behind him, Alaric jumps, opening his mouth wide. He clamps down over the king’s shoulder. His front most fangs puncture the soft spot just above the king's sternum. Serena clutches her own chest, pain ringing through her body.

She skids to a stop, pulling Ervin's last arrow from her quiver. She nocks it and takes aim. Exhaling, Serena releases her arrow between mouthfuls of air. She keeps her bow in position, watching her arrow head directly for the mark—the space between Alaric's eyes. She knows her shot is right on target even before the arrow crosses the short span of ocean to the whale rock.

Just before the arrow hits, it is caught. The king lowers his hand, squeezing. The arrow snaps in two. It clatters against the rock, sliding harmlessly into the ocean. The half-smile on Serena's face freezes.

As if given a blessing, Alaric clenches his jaw. His fangs pierce the rest of the way, just below the king's neck. King Merrick slumps, the life going from his eyes before his head hits hard rock.

Alaric shakes his head back and forth, tearing at the king. Then he stands, one paw up on his victim's dead body, and howls.

Wolves answer the howl with their own, whether they are in wolf or Ungainly form. The magic suspended, even after death, Alaric races back to shore. A small, rainbow colored piece flops outside of his mouth like a lolling tongue.

The Undine maidens watch helpless, and in shock. Their king has died, in front of all of Society. Beside Serena, one of the guardsmen bends, throwing up. Serena has no more arrows, no more energy. She watches because there isn't much more she can do.

With a sacrifice made, the wolves retreat into the woods. Serena raises her hand, returning her farewell to her father, the king.

Chapter Forty-Six

After the last of the wolves' tails disappear amidst the shadow of the trees, Undine maidens come onto shore. They help the wounded back into the water. They collect Undine arrows and the few pieces of broken bows. Colored scales and dark blood, the only evidence left behind by battle will be washed away at high tide.

Serena returns to Kai, and burgundy scales, brilliant against the pale sand catches her eye. Cordelia emerges from the water, racing toward Ervin. Before anyone can stop her, she reaches him and turns him over. She leans back, gasping at the sight of his disfigured face. She is dragged back into the water, crying and screaming as someone picks up Ervin's trident. Others wait until Cordelia has gone under, then begin the task of wrapping his body, preparing to transport him home in the most gracious way they can.

Kai moves next to Serena and they lean into each other, wrapping their arms around each other's shoulders. Serena still limps and Kai clutches his chest wound. They stumble into the waves, allowing the maidens to escort them back to their kingdom alongside the dead.

* * *

Hailey's cave is packed with the wounded. Serena and Kai receive treatment in the hallway, where Simone applies various oils and creams, wrapping injuries with deft, expert fingers. Kai doesn't let go of Serena's hand the entire time and quite possibly, Simone is too busy to notice.

Nerin walks the halls, speaking softly to the survivors. Serena does not remember seeing her on the beach, but Nerin has to know by now what has happened.

Nerin bends next to Serena. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," says Serena. "But others…Sasha—" her voice chokes up. She cannot finish the sentence.

"I know," Nerin pats Serena's hand. "I know."

My own selfish pride brought her to the battle, one from which she won't return.

Serena lays her head back against hard rock. "I suppose you will want to send me back to the lower caves?" Serena is under no illusions that the punishment will be forgotten, even after the king's death.

Nerin takes a deep breath, sending a quick glance at Kai. Kai squeezes Serena's hand.

"In light of the situation, Zayla has already declared your punishment fulfilled. The king himself recorded your pardon from serving punishments for the crime in the scrolls before the battle. I will announce it as soon as Society is well enough to assemble in the Great Hall," says Nerin, standing. "But Serena," she glances at Kai and Serena's interlocked hands once again. "Please, we must maintain appearances."

Murphy passes through the hallway in front of them, frowning down at Kai. Even after all that has happened, Murphy and Serena must hold up pretenses of a couple. And they can't do that when it is Kai's hand Serena holds.

"I don't—" Serena says.

She is cut off by a sharp squeeze of Kai's hand. "It's okay," he says, whispering. "It can wait." He releases her and stands to head to the Great Hall, holding his side as he goes.

After each injured Undine receives treatment from a healer, they follow Kai to the Great Hall. No one can bear to return to their caves. The holes left empty by those that have passed on are too obvious. Undine trickle into the Great Hall without being summoned and stand in tight groups, lending or receiving support, both physical and emotional.

Only the few that are tending to the bodies laid out in the armory, being prepared for the fires, are not there. Serena enters the Great Hall with Kai. Mariam and Rayne spot the pair before anyone else. They rush forward, placing a gentle hand on Kai's cheek before hugging Serena. There are no words. What can be said? Nothing will make what happened better.

"Serena?" Nerin's voice is soft, but it carries throughout the cavern.

Serena looks up at the high-platform. Nerin stands next to the throne. In the king's place is a large, hardback book and a tightly-wrapped scroll, cinched closed with the king's mark.

Serena walks forward with Kai, Rayne, and Mariam close behind her. The Great Hall falls silent. The only sound is Serena's tread, her pace

awkward and imbalanced because of her limp. She automatically thinks of Ervin and has to stop to take a deep breath, fighting back tears.

She feels a supportive, warm hand on the small of her back. Drawing strength from the bloom of heat, Serena walks the rest of the way to the front of the room and steps up to the mid-platform, turning to face Society.

Behind her, Nerin picks up the scroll from the throne. There is a tear of paper as she breaks the seal and unrolls the scroll. Nerin clears her throat and speaks. "Serena Moon-Shadow," Nerin glances at Serena, then back down at the scroll. "You are hereby absolved of all charges for the crime of absconding."

The formalities seem trivial after the battle, and Serena feels guilty Society has to sit through it right now.

"The king's seal and signature accompany the scroll." Nerin holds up the parchment to the council members for their verification. Each nod their agreement. "The account is settled," Nerin glances at Society. "Serena Moon-Shadow is cleared of all charges."

There is no clapping, and no cheers—just a small murmur of agreement from the crowd.

"The king ends the scroll by a passage of reference in the Ancestral Book." Nerin leans over the throne to pick up the large hardback book.

More murmurs come from Society as they look upon a book normally kept in the King's Library. Many have never even laid eyes on the restricted literature.

Nerin balances it on her forearms as she flips through the pages. "Ah, here it is," she says, glancing at Serena. "Lineage of the First Undine. The story begins 200,000 years ago with Atargatis, the Lady Goddess of the Sea."

Heads bow in reverence at the mention of the first mermaid.

"But it didn't end with the Maiden's Massacre," Nerin continues. "Nor did the royal bloodline end with tonight's battle."

As the true story of the Maiden's Massacre and Serena's birthright progresses, Serena thinks how she will have to alter it to include the fact that Liam, the king's son and Serena's twin, also survived the slaughter.

As Nerin continues to read, Serena looks over at the council. She sees friends, but she also sees corruption, greed, jealousy, and anger. To her right is the King's Guard formation. They are strong, willing, and devoted —she can see that even now. But they are too few.

Next, her eyes scan all of Society standing before her. Maidens, young and old, each painted in the bold colors of the court. They all look to Serena with open mouths, faces finally enlightened with the truth.

Like scattered ripples on the ocean's surface, the cascade of colors reminds Serena of the king's own scales. He lives and breathes right in front of her, through the shades of his people.

"The king has made a new entry within the Ancestral Book." Nerin clears her throat and reads, "I hereby decree that Serena Moon-Shadow, my one true daughter and the last surviving maiden of the first Undine bloodline, take the throne as Queen."

Undine eyes flit over from Nerin to Serena.

Serena looks out at them, blood pounding in her ears.

In the crowd, Serena sees Rayne's hands go to her mouth and a small but prideful gasp escapes her lips.

"Your majesty," Nerin speaks up, gesturing to the throne.

Serena turns and floats forward, as if caught in a current. She steps up, taking Nerin's hand for much needed support, and sits down on the large throne.

Murphy and Kai leave the line of council members and come to attention in front of Serena. Behind them, the crowd shifts as the rest of the King's Guard makes their way forward.

Once the entire guard stands in front of the crowd, Murphy bows. Kai does the same, and the rest of the guard follows.

Serena looks behind her. Nerin curtsies. Evandre, Zayla, and the rest of the council are next.

Nerin steps forward, facing out to Society. "All hail our new queen." The words ring out in the cavern.

There is an echo, and it does not belong to Nerin. It belongs to the whole of Society. "Long live the Queen."

The Betrayed, Book Two

For all at last return to the sea…

Chapter One

Calming her fins, Serena's natural buoyancy carries her to the surface until her head rises just above the water. The glassy coating protecting her eyes when she is under retracts, and The Dry comes into focus. The plump moon behind her illuminates the shimmering bronze sand, beckoning Serena to come ashore and bury her toes there. It is the shadows creeping out from the forest beyond the beach that warn her to stay away.

Serena scans the beach and the Ungainly footprints pockmarking the otherwise pristine surface. The footprints disappear as the tide inches higher. The wind moves in to decimate what the waves do not reach, blowing granules of sand and blurring the outline of sandaled feet. Her eyes come to rest on a different set of prints—three of them in total. These are not Ungainly, these have claws—and they are fresh.

The werewolves have already begun their patrols, barely after the last of the Ungainlies have left the beach. Each night since the King's Massacre, one less wolf is spared for the patrols. Serena can't decide if they are growing tired of waiting or are doing it to entice the Undine out.

They can't be that smart, Serena thinks. But the predictability itself gives cause for concern. Werewolves are anything but predictable.

Like Liam—the one person I thought could lead us on a path of peace alongside the wolves. Instead, he turned out to be one giant roadblock. *And my twin brother.*

Liam sustained injuries during the King's Massacre, but they weren't life threatening. He must be with his pack now, but the question remains—is he persona non-grata? Is he being punished for the secret meetings he had with Serena? Or did they go just as he planned, leading the Undine to a war ultimately resulting in the death of their king?

Serena bites her lip, and she can hear Nerin's voice echoing in her head. *A queen does not bite her lip.* The Queen's Second is relentless when it

comes to etiquette. Serena releases her lip, instead gritting her teeth. There has been a lot of that as of late.

She considers her options, but the truth of it is, the Undine are running out of choices. In three short months, Cordelia will give birth to the only calfling blessed to Society since Serena herself. Cordelia needs a place to do it, and she needs to feel safe while doing so. Poseidon-forbid the child enter the world weak and dying. It would not be a good foretelling of Serena's reign to come. Kelp reaches up to tickle Serena's fins. She flicks it away.

A queen does not play with her food.

Serena grits her teeth again.

Back on the beach, an aged skunk lumbers out of the tree line and makes its way toward food wrappers left by beach picnickers. It noses through them, unconcerned with the shadows at its back.

Would it be out if wolves are still in the area? She trusts the skunk's nose better than her own; it has survived the forest this long.

Serena's fins go stagnant once again, until her neck and shoulders rise above the water. The skunk pauses, looking up, but it cannot distinguish her form amongst the waves. He goes back to pawing through Ungainly trash.

Serena moves forward, already eyeing the breaker that will bring her to shore. Bubbles float up in front of her, popping open along the surface. Serena has only a split-second to lean back when a golden trident shoots up, piercing the air in front of her. Three sharp barbs come into focus, inches from her nose. In between them, the blurred form of the skunk scurries back into the tree line.

The trident lowers as another Undine head breaches the surface. Serena allows herself to breath and a small, one-sided smile creeps onto her face at the sight of sea-green eyes. "You again?"

In front of her, Kai smiles back. "You aren't very good at sneaking out."

"I made it to the surface this time, didn't I?"

Kai moves his trident to his side. "Only because you had outside help. You knew Morven couldn't resist Rayne's noodled kelp."

Serena briefly thinks of the guard on watch; his rumbling stomach made her getaway all too easy.

Kai sighs, briefly looking up at the moon. It will be full by the end of the week. "I suppose I'll just have to trade my rounds out for more watches

with the queen."

Serena bites her lip.

Kai looks back at her and frowns. "A queen doesn't—"

Serena splashes water at his face with both hands, effectively cutting off his reprimand. The smile is gone from her lips.

He runs his palm down his face and shakes the water from his sandy hair. It has grown longer since the Queen's Guard increased their duties; there has barely been time for them to eat, much less for personal grooming.

Serena moves around him, eyes locked on the shore. In one swift movement, his hand shoots out, grabbing her arm above the elbow.

His grip is tight, painful almost. Serena doesn't twist away. His touch, however uncomfortable, is a welcome sensation. No one ever touches the queen.

Kai loosens his fingers, one by one, then lets go all together. He reaches down and yanks up, dragging a freshly plucked kelp stem with him. Serena moves back, watching as he winds the brown seaweed into a tight ball around his fist. His eyes don't leave her face.

Once done, Kai grips the ball with his other hand, turns toward the shore and takes aim. The wet ball of seaweed arcs in the air. The tail becomes loose and hisses as it vibrates back and forth. The whole thing lands with a splat on the sand, just in front of the tree line.

Not seconds later, the furry muzzle of a werewolf emerges, sniffing at the kelp.

Serena's breath catches in her throat.

That damn skunk would've been the death of me.

The wolves have been there all along. Another muzzle shoots out, baring his teeth and forcing the other one back into the shadows. This muzzle is black, indiscernible from the dark forest other than the shiny nose and gleaming, white teeth.

Serena remembers those teeth well, tearing into the kings neck, then ripping away pieces of his beautiful, rainbow tail—the last of its kind. Alaric, the first of the wolves, is out tonight. It could be that he is there every night, patrolling the shores and keeping the Undine at bay.

Serena and Kai exchange a glance as the wolves slip back into shrouded shadows. Serena nods at Kai; it is all the thanks she will give, and even

that much is wholly unnecessary according to the Queen's Guard. Kai returns the nod anyway.

"Summon Cordelia to the Great Hall," Serena says. "We need to talk." She turns away, preparing to dive.

Kai's hand on her arm stops her once again. "After I escort her majesty safely back to the kingdom, of course."

Serena glances at his hand, then back to his wild green eyes. "Of course."

Chapter Two

Kai dives first, leading the way with strong, sure flicks of his tail. Serena follows, only able to match his speed by pulsing her fins twice as much. When he turns to skirt around the northern edge of Vancouver Island, following the currents of the strait, Serena trails behind.

She opens her mouth, clicking and whistling under the water to catch Kai's attention. He pauses, looking back. Gesturing with her head, Serena signals to take the long way around. Though it has mostly to do with delaying her inevitable entrance to court, she also doesn't ever miss an opportunity to survey the corals.

Relenting, Kai now keeps his pace slow, letting Serena take the lead. She moves to the seafloor where the strength of the current lessens, though it still has an effect. Here the water is crisp and clear, washing the corals in constant fresh seawater. The coral forests are a living, breathing ecosystem, moving in sync with the pulse of the ocean and displaying a kaleidoscope of colors. Schools of fish travel in and out of the spiny grottos seeking food and refuge.

Dipping lower, Serena is careful not to touch any of the delicate structures, and she keeps the movement of her fins smooth and slow. Cabbage coral in varying shades of green, beige, and pink grow in an expansive field on the slope of a seamount. Layer upon layer of stiff leaves surrounding each other in endless circles of protection. Up close they remind Serena of the roses she sees Ungainlies sometimes carrying on the beach; a romantic gesture given from one mate to another. She glances at Kai, cheeks heating. Exchanging freshly plucked plants would be more like an insult to the Undine.

As she moves forward, tiny crustaceans and bright-colored fish dart down, taking shelter amidst the dark crevices in between the layers of cabbage coral. Serena can almost detect a subtle glow of life emanating from the reefs. Gliding around a spindly, bright purple sea fan coral, Serena imagines it looks much like the complicated network of her own veins, delivering essential nutrients and blood to the region around them.

A small lingcod peeking out tentatively from a clump of rocks catches Serena's eye before he disappears. When it comes out again, the blue-gray fish swims down to a small cove in between rocks. She follows it, stunned to find hundreds of white eggs, snuggled together. The lingcod is their father. He tends to the eggs, nudging them with his lips and nose, cleaning and aerating them.

Despite his attentive care, their survival rate will be extremely low; especially as food becomes more and more scarce. It reminds Serena of Cordelia and the new life growing inside of her. Despite everything Society might do for the calfling, the prospect of survival isn't good. Serena sighs, then swims on.

Right up against the edge of the current, Serena braces herself for what is to come. She pauses, waiting for Kai to join her. Without looking at him, or even thinking about it, she holds out her hand. He takes it, squeezing tight, and they cross out of the current together.

The change is night and day. Coral fields spread out before them are nothing but crumbling skeletons—mere twigs from what once was a thriving forest. There are but a few dots of color, brain corals struggling to survive. Algae dominates these corals, choking the life out of them. The temporary regrowth will soon die. The stench of rot and death surrounding the algae isn't as frightening as the white-washed nothingness crawling across the rest of the fields. There are no fish here. No sea stars, mollusks, or sponges. Just a few snails—bottom feeders wandering aimlessly over the skeletal coral remains.

Serena floats toward one, ushering it to a particularly nasty section of algae. A lump forms in her throat as she looks up at Kai. These coral fields are hundreds of years old, alive and thriving even before her father was born. Now only gray and white remain of the once vibrant colors. They look beat up and gnarled, like an old man's fingers.

In just the past year, the Undine have come to realize the perishing condition of the ocean is the reason they can't give birth to healthy male calflings, and now the females are showing signs as well. Almost eighteen years ago, a desperate attempt to save the male calflings actually transformed them into the pack of wolves they are today. For a while, the two species bred from the same lineage lived peacefully, the wolves even serving as Undine protectors. But the night Serena was born, the wolves

revolted, ending her mother's life, separating Serena from her twin brother, and turning each species against each other.

If only the ocean could stay healthy, Serena thinks, brushing the pad of her finger against one of the hardened, bare corals. *None of it would have happened.*

Kai takes Serena by the hand, urging her away from the destruction. Corals grow so slowly, only a centimeter every year, recovery would take a few hundred years. Kai and Serena will never witness these fields come back to life.

They move toward Society slowly, as if the surrounding dead ecosystem sucks the energy right out of them. Once they cross the borders to Society, they pick up speed. The chain of life is apparent—the corals they pass begin to show color, then freshly grown polyps. As more and more of them crowd the area, so does other plant life and the water itself turns greener rather than dull gray. A school of salmon bustles around Serena and Kai, silvery-gray scales shining out on their hunt for food. The moonlight above them darkens. They glance up as the beams are blotted out by a fever of stingrays.

Finally, the first Undine come into view. Yellow, bright pink, and deep purple—they manage to shine out from the colorful underwater world like flowers on a cliff. Undine gardeners pick at the terrain, salvaging food for Society, but careful not to damage what is left of their ecosystem.

Serena follows Kai, who has moved in front of her to assume an escort position, as if he has been there all along. She does her best to avoid the stares of her kinsmen as she passes, keeping her eyes ahead—always ahead. They angle down, enter the first caves, and then ascend to make the transition from water to air.

Kai's transformation into Ungainly form is fast. His light brown scales sink into the skin of his legs, revealing strong, thick thighs and calves. He uncrosses his legs, keeping enough scales down his thighs to stay decent in front of Serena.

Serena follows suit, only slightly behind him, and they both kick the rest of the way to the surface. When Serena and Kai enter the Great Hall, they call forth more scales, covering themselves down to the ankles in the traditional dress of the Great Hall.

"Nerin and Murphy wear the same frown," whispers Kai.

Serena looks up at Nerin standing next to the throne and Murphy, the Head of the Guard, next to her. "And it probably has nothing to do with the fact that they are mother and son," says Serena.

"Next time, maybe you'll think twice before trying to go to The Dry unescorted," Kai lifts a chiding eyebrow, then falls in step slightly behind her, matching her stride. It is Serena's turn to lead.

Serena steels herself, taking a deep breath in and straightening her back. Murphy descends the stairs to meet the queen. Stepping through the rigid wall of the Queen's Guard who are lined up in front of the throne, Murphy motions for Kai to take his place at one end. Serena watches, looking for some sign of his mood after their swim, but his face has gone blank—the impenetrable façade indicative of the Queen's Guard. Nerin clears her throat and Serena whips her head back around. The Second's eyes are wide, silently chastising Serena for her wandering gaze.

Murphy spares Serena any more taciturn rebukes by bringing the guard to attention. There is a sharp clang of feet and scales snapping together.

"Morven Redwood, step forward," Murphy says.

Without hesitation, the largest guard member marches forward and comes to attention by Murphy's side, directly in front of Serena. Morven's shoulders span so wide, even he often underestimates their range. He bumps into his commanding officer. Murphy has to break his rigid stance in order to catch his balance.

"You stand in front of the queen, Morven," Murphy says, frowning at him.

Morven's eyes go wide. He steps forward and bends in a bow. "Your majesty."

Serena leans back so the large Undine does not knock heads with her. As he straightens, Serena catches a whiff of Rayne's noodled kelp on his breath—evidence of his misdeed.

Morven steps back. He is the tallest guard member by far, standing a full head taller than Murphy, even. Serena has to crane her neck back to look at him.

"Failure to carry out orders. Abandoning post. Subjecting the queen to unnecessary danger." Murphy barks out accusations like he has been practicing for days. Morven winces at each one.

"Since I've stood post as Head of the Guard, never have I seen such incompetence. And never, *never* has a guard member shown their queen or

king such disrespect—"

"Disrespect?" Serena interrupts Murphy. "I'm sorry but I fail to see how following my orders can be interpreted as disrespect."

The Head of the Guard presses his lips together. He tries to take a deep breath at the same time, which results in a high-pitched buzz as air is sucked in between his teeth. "While I realize your majesty released Morven of his watch, he must still abide to a specific set of orders."

The room goes quiet. Anyone can follow the argument through to the basic problem. Whose orders supersede all others? Those of the queen or the Head of the Guard?

It is a problem best left alone—Nerin has told Serena as much. The two heads of Society should never contradict each other. The fact that Serena and Murphy are assumed by Society to be mated makes the situation all the more complicated. They should present themselves as a team, especially if they seek to gain the unwavering trust of Society.

The easy thing to do would be to let Morven take the blame and be subjected to whatever punishment Murphy decides. But Serena suspects there is a bigger underlying issue that needs resolving in order to avoid future complications.

Serena looks up at the giant Undine. His eyebrows are lifted in the center, but they slope down to the outside, causing worry lines to show around his eyes. His grip on his trident is so tight, his hand is turning white.

"Tell me, Morven," Serena addresses the guard. "Before I sent you to Rayne, when was the last time you had eaten?"

Morven glances down at Serena before answering the question. "I'm not sure, exactly, your majesty."

Serena crosses her arms. "You are a very large Undine, Morven."

"Yes, your majesty." He is looking straight forward again.

"The largest of all Undine, I'd say."

"Yes, your majesty." He shifts his weight back and forth on his feet.

"I can summon Rayne to know for sure, but I think it's safe to say one of your size requires more volume of sustenance than the average Undine."

Morven's eyebrows stitch together.

Serena gives him a moment; there were a lot of complex words in that sentence.

Finally, Morven speaks. "I…suppose, your majesty."

"So I ask again—when was the last time you ate, before visiting Rayne?" Serena uncrosses her arms and clasps her hands behind her back.

"It had been two moons, your majesty." Morven doesn't hesitate this time.

Murphy's head whips to the side and he stares at Morven, open-mouthed.

The large guard glances at his boss, his empty hand twitching. "I'm really sorry," he says, then looks at Serena. "My deepest regrets, your majesty. I accept whatever punishment—"

Serena holds up her hand, stopping him. "Why did you go so long without fulfilling some of your own basic needs?"

Now Morven's lower lip is quivering. "Normally I can find something in between rounds, but I was on a double shift patrolling borders, and there's no…" Morven trails off, hesitating to mention that only dead corals border the kingdom. No one likes to say out loud that the Undine realm is dying.

Serena looks at Murphy.

He nods at her, then turns to Morven. "Take your place in line."

Morven performs a flank, but his turn is slower, and his chin lowers as he marches to rejoin the rank of guards.

There is nothing more to be said. Murphy will have to take into account the state of the environment, even when performing basic functions such as assigning rounds.

Serena looks at Murphy, then inadvertently glances at the small door carved into the side of the Great Hall. It is the entrance to the chambers in which the pair retires each night, together. The continued exhibition of them being paired supposedly helps endear Serena to the people since Murphy is a long-standing authoritarian figure, whereas Serena is not.

They will talk more later.

Her eyes flit from the shadowed entrance straight to Kai. It is an involuntary reaction. Serena does it each time she looks at the room. Kai never meets her gaze; he keeps his eyes straight forward, giving no sign he is even aware of her.

Behind Serena, Nerin clears her throat, breaking the one-sided exchange. "The council approaches."

Chapter Three

As the council filters into the Great Hall, Serena takes her place at the throne and Murphy marches the guards back into formation of two ranks on either side of the high platform.

The order in which the council appear is telling. Sarafina, the head gardener, and Evandre, the scientist, walk in first. By all accounts, the pair should have been the furthest away, working to stop the deterioration of the corals lying on the outskirts of Society's borders. Instead, they slink around the mainstream of Society with their closest assistants, like a swarm of jellyfish congregating in the warm waters. Serena watches Sarafina's yellow and Evandre's purple move forward in unison. They are the colors of royalty—the most prevalent colors in the former king's tail.

Purple and yellow, both vying for the throne, but passed over for Serena's dark blue scales which lie flat and inconspicuous against the waters of the ocean that surround Society.

Serena takes a deep breath, forcing her back straighter. She can hear Nerin's hum of approval behind her.

Next to enter is Zayla, Serena's former Caste Master, her gold scales glittering against the minerals in the cavern walls and ceilings. Zayla herself brought to light Serena's Absconding charges, and she has kept her distance from the new queen since the crowning.

The next two council members enter—Hailey Sage-Brush, the healer, and Isadora, the psychic. Together, they remind Serena of the Aurora Borealis. Hailey's bright blue-green painted across the inky black northern skies—the same inky black as Isadora's scales.

Serena studies her aunt Isadora. Of course, Serena didn't know they were related until recently, when the king revealed that Serena was his own daughter, and not the orphan she was raised to believe she was.

Look for the one called Alaric. I must know about him. Isadora's words after she sentenced Serena to visit the werewolf camp still nag at Serena. Why such an interest?

Sarafina clears her throat, drawing Serena's attention back to her.

Studying Sarafina from head to scaled toe, Serena determines she doesn't appear exerted with the kind of swim it takes to get to the dead corals, and probably hasn't for some time.

"The status of the corals?" Serena asks.

Sarafina glances at Evandre. Protecting the corals is the only duty Serena has tasked the pair since she was crowned. *The utmost importance for the welfare of Society*, she remembers telling the two.

When Sarafina looks back at Serena, she folds her hands and relaxes her shoulders. "We are monitoring them," she answers.

Serena frowns. Hard to monitor the corals when you are always so far away from them, but Serena doesn't speak the admonishment aloud. Along with constant reminders to sit up straight and keep her teeth away from her lips, Nerin impresses upon Serena the importance of remaining in the good graces of the council. A slighted council member can turn Society against Serena quicker than an Ungainly can drown.

Instead, Serena smiles at Sarafina and Evandre. "I'm confident you will solve the problem. Such a feat would assure Society that you have their best interests in mind during these trying times."

"A wonderful idea, your majesty," Nerin speaks up at Serena's side. "In fact, we will announce the mission during next Assembly. I think the equivalent of such an important task can be assigned to each of the council members. It will be the perfect opportunity to demonstrate their ability to serve their new queen as well as guide Society into the new era we face."

Serena smiles. If anything, it is the opportune method to force a resistant council to operate.

Forced smiles and nods run up and down the line of council members; some openly glare at Evandre and Sarafina, as if it is their fault in the first place.

The slight sound of shuffling feet draws all eyes to the arched entryway as Cordelia enters. Her burgundy scales have become the most recognizable color among the Painted Maidens and the more she withdraws, hiding away from Society in her own cave, the more prevalent they are when she shows herself. Dark claret scales smolder beneath her golden waves of hair, like a subtle warning, telling those around her to back off.

And they do.

The Great Hall is not crowded, but a clear path unfolds in front of Cordelia as Undine step away. Serena's gut clenches in sympathy. She is all too aware of the chill that snakes down your spine when too many eyes are upon you. Serena feels it when she takes the throne, though it seems to subside with practice. She remembers the full brunt of it each time she made the trek to the front of the Great Hall during her trial and subsequent punishments.

Cordelia's striking blonde hair, woven into a tight braid that hugs the nape of her neck, draws cursory glances, as it always has. But now Serena's eyes always travel down to the bulge of her belly. Today, it looks even bigger. The inevitable swell is a constant reminder to Serena; the Undine are running out of time.

Cordelia fixes her stare on the floor in front of her and bends her knees in a curtsey.

Serena stiffens at the awkward moment. Less than a year ago, Cordelia was the popular one in their caste, always at the front of their traveling formation while Serena stuck to the back.

When Cordelia straightens, Serena takes a deep breath. "You are well?" she asks.

"I am, your majesty," Cordelia answers with a slight bob of her head.

Serena's eyes travel down to the bump again, she can't help it.

Folding her hands over her stomach, Cordelia clears her throat. "You requested my presence, your majesty?"

"Yes, I would like to discuss the impending birth—but I didn't quite expect an audience," Serena says, her eyes flitting to the council and coming to rest on Sarafina and Evandre. Sarafina looks down, running deft hands over her scales, but Evandre holds Serena's gaze.

"We can have the discussion in your own quarters, if you'd like. Or even mine—" Serena cuts herself off when Nerin nudges her with her elbow. "Or not," Serena mumbles, gritting her teeth. No one but Murphy and the queen herself are allowed in the queen's quarters. "But I'd like the Head of the Guard to be present, along with the Healer," Serena motions to Murphy and Hailey.

"It's fine, we can discuss it here, your majesty," Cordelia says, her voice calm.

Serena nods to Murphy, who sends two guards to the entrance of the Great Hall. The discussion won't be interrupted by curious passersby.

As soon as they take post, Serena looks back at Cordelia. "Are you scared?" she asks. The words are out of Serena's mouth before she can stop herself.

The room goes silent. Even condensation from the stalactites hanging from the ceiling ceases to drip.

Cordelia's eyes widen slightly, and Serena watches one hand tighten over the other. "I know birthings haven't gone well in the past, before the Maiden's Massacre," says Cordelia. "But I have faith in my queen and council."

"You know only what Society chose to reveal to the Temporal Caste," says Serena, her voice going soft. "Most of it has been kept from us so that we face this event…" Serena gestures to Cordelia's stomach. "Willingly and with minimal stress."

The two Undine were part of a larger caste together, thirteen in all, who together made the youngest Undine of Society. With other attempts at mating and birthing thwarted by werewolves, or mother and child falling victim to the sheer amount of stress during unnatural birthing circumstances, there had been no more calflings.

Zayla steps forward, raising one finger. "I'm not sure the council would agree with revealing the gruesome past to Cordelia."

"I'm not sure the council made the right decision keeping it from us," Serena snaps back, her words clipped.

Zayla's golden scales flash under the minerals of the cave. As both Serena's and Cordelia's former Caste Master, Zayla can't feel good being schooled by her students.

Serena sighs, realizing she was more harsh than she intended to be.

"It was the king's decree," says Zayla, voice low.

"Under whose guidance?" Nerin steps beside the throne. "We were all there to advise the king, and he made his decision. If Serena wishes to reverse his decision, it is her prerogative. We will support her and give counsel only when asked."

Zayla defers to Nerin, bobbing her head and stepping back, much more quickly than she would have to Serena. Despite the change in leadership, Nerin at least has remained a constant reminder of how the hierarchy works.

Satisfied, Nerin steps back and turns to Serena. "Is this what you wish? All you have to do is allow Cordelia access to the King's Library."

Everyone turns to Serena, waiting for the decision in silence, but Serena's eyes fall on Cordelia. "I will leave the decision up to you, Cordelia. This birthing will not follow policies set forth by myself or the council. We will all defer to the mother. If you wish to read the histories residing in the restricted section of the King's Library, you have my permission. But you must make your decision soon. The passageway to the archives is…" Serena glances down at her stomach. "Narrow."

The Undine have nine full moons from mating to birth. Six have already passed.

Cordelia blushes. "Thank you, your majesty. I will decide soon and let you know."

Serena nods, and can't help but look up at Nerin. The Queen's Second presses her lips together, but the edges of one side turns up in approval.

Serena lets out a slow, quiet sigh. "You may go," she says to Cordelia.

Cordelia curtsies, and turns on her heel. Before she exits the Great Hall, Serena beckons for Kai. He approaches and kneels in a bow before the throne. It is exaggerated, his head almost touching the stairs in front of him and lasting longer than it should.

Serena has to resist rolling her eyes. She knows he has to keep up appearances, but bowing before her makes the relationship awkward, whether he is poking fun in his own way or not.

When he finally stands, Serena gestures with her hand for him to approach. He moves up the stairs, and kneels again. This time Serena does roll her eyes. She leans forward to whisper. "Follow her, and convince her she must go to the King's Library. Prepare her with some of the history beforehand, if you must. Just enough to pique her curiosity."

He lifts his head and raises an eyebrow at Serena. This close, Serena can feel his breath caress her cheek and wrap around her neck.

"Pique her curiosity?" he asks.

"Yes," Serena closes her eyes, forcing air into her own lungs. She wishes she kissed him when she had the chance, back at the beach. What else can she say to keep him close? She can't think of anything, and the council's eyes miss nothing. She sighs in regret. "Go now."

Kai straightens, only to bend again in a deep bow. He turns with a flourish, descends the stairs, and performs another bow. By now Cordelia has left the Great Hall, and Kai has to trot out after her, holding his trident in front of him like he is charging to battle.

Serena laughs, but slaps her hand over her mouth after she realizes what she's done. She coughs into her hand, trying to mask the break in appropriate court composure. Feeling a touch at her shoulder, Serena turns up to look at Nerin.

"The queen needs her rest?" Nerin says.

Serena isn't sure if it is a question or a statement, but she nods then pushes herself out of the throne. "I shall retire," she informs the council.

They each curtsey, and Murphy calls the guard members to attention as Serena descends the stairs. *One, two, three, four, five, six.* Serena counts each time she goes up or down. It helps keep her nerves at bay.

Turning to the only other arched doorway besides the entrance to the Great Hall, Serena glides past the council, feeling their heads turn to watch her as she passes. Her pace quickens, and she is grateful she isn't bound to the throne until high tide comes in like the king was.

Behind her, Murphy gives orders to the guard. He will follow Serena in shortly, which is another reason Serena sent Kai away. She needed an excuse to spare him from watching that again.

It should be Kai following me in every night, Serena thinks for the hundredth time.

Chapter Four

The small arch gives way to a short tunnel about the size of Serena's old cave on the outskirts of Society's underwater mountain. She pauses at the end of it as she always does, considering sleeping in the snug confines of the tunnel instead of the massive chamber that was once her father's sleeping cove.

Even after almost six months of forcing herself to sleep here, she still can't get over how unfamiliar it feels—even more so than the oversized throne. Her fingertips linger against the tunnel wall as her eyes scan the room. Serena imagines it represents what the kingdom looked like on the outside of the mountain, the part that had to be destroyed in order to hide its presence from curious Ungainlies.

Pillars carved with swirling pictures and etchings in the ancient language stretch from floor to ceiling. Around the circumference of the room, small coves are sculpted into the walls. They are just large enough for each member of the Queen's Guard to remain close during times of threat. To Serena's knowledge, they've never been used, except by her. She prefers a small cove to the massive bed carved from rock occupying the middle of the room. Like the tunnel she still stands in, the cove is small and almost cozy. Its constricting walls take away the colossal sensation of emptiness the rest of the room holds. It is too much like the Great Hall, packed with every Undine in the kingdom under the open air suspended over them, waiting for Serena's voice to penetrate the space with decrees, guidance, reassurance, strength, and everything else Nerin preaches the monarch should do.

There is too much emptiness in this kingdom.

Serena closes her eyes and steps forward, letting her fingertips fall from the tunnel walls. Crossing the open space quickly, she reaches out with her other hand until it meets with the rock of King Merrick's bed. A giant column formed when stalactite met with stalagmite, melding together. Unlike the other columns squared off around the cavern, this one doesn't structurally support the room. The only thing it supports, or used to, was a sleeping king.

An area was chipped out of the bottom of the column, leaving only four thick posts on each corner to keep the entire structure from crashing down. Serena begins circling the bed, stopping when her arms wrap around one of the posts. Footsteps echo down the tunnel, and she turns to face Murphy. She fails to convince her arm to let go of the post.

Murphy enters the room, stopping just outside of the tunnel.

Serena holds her breath, waiting for his first words.

Will it be a reprimand or praise? Usually it sets the tone for the rest of the conversation.

"You should not question my authority in front of my men," he says, standing rigid with his trident perfectly parallel to his form.

Letting out a slow sigh, Serena prepares herself for the argument. But defensive words don't come. Instead, she turns, sinking down onto the rocky bed. She holds the post even tighter and leans her head against it. "I'm tired, Murphy." *And I'm not cut out for this.*

At. All.

Her unspoken words hang in the air between them like dead weight. Murphy strides forward, cutting through the tension as efficiently as a shark fin on the ocean surface. When he comes to a stop in front of Serena, she expects a rough jerk to her feet. Maybe even a good shaking. Sometimes harsh words and fierce actions are all Murphy seems capable of.

Instead, he turns and sits beside Serena. She leans away to look at him, mouth open. Sitting on the king's bed would be unheard of for anyone, and she can only imagine the punishment Murphy might dole out to one of his own for doing so.

He sits rigid, leaning forward still on the balls of his feet like he might dart up any second. His eyes jump around, taking in the new view of the sleeping rock. He twists to look behind him and up.

"Poseidon," he says, almost to himself.

Serena's eyes flit up to the carving at the top of the bed. The sea god stands erect with one arm raised. His beard hangs past his chiseled chest, and a tunic falls loose around his waist. It is the same drawing looming over the Undine prison.

"No wonder you don't want to sleep here," Murphy murmurs.

The sound of shuffling feet echo from the tunnel and a shadow passes over the opening. Serena and Murphy both jump to their feet.

They are supposed to be mated, but neither can bear the thought of being caught together on the king's bed.

"It's just one of the guards taking his post," says Murphy.

They both let out a breath.

"Not Kai…" Serena says.

Murphy shakes his head, turning toward her. "I know you have feelings for each other, but they can't be displayed in public. It would seriously harm both our reputations. Your relationship with Kai will have to wait."

Serena sighs. "I know, but Murphy…we can't wait forever."

He nods, looking at the tips of his trident. "We'll figure something out. Maybe stage an elaborate break up scene," he says, one side of his mouth curling up in a crooked smile.

Serena laughs. "That would be fun."

"But after I ensure Society is willing to obey you, no matter what."

Her laughter dies out, and the heavy weight of silence settles in again.

Murphy clears his throat. "Society will be in enough turmoil as it is—we need to make sure the majority of the Undine are behind you before we…split. That was the reason for our pairing, anyway."

"The king had it all planned out, didn't he?" Serena asks. "The punishments, naming me Werewolf Liaison, and even my…" She glances at Murphy. "Mate. He had my whole life arranged before I've even had a chance to live it."

Murphy lays his large hand on Serena's shoulder. "Your father had to face choices no father should ever have to face. Take the opportunities he left you and do something meaningful with them."

Serena forces a smile up at Murphy. "I'll try—but I'm not sleeping in this bed."

Laughing, Murphy pats Serena on the shoulder, twice. "Come on, I'll hoist you up into your favorite nook."

The pair walk to the wall, Serena closer to Murphy than she has to be. The room doesn't seem as enormous that way.

A single trident stands against the wall, marking her sleeping place. The weapon is the smallest of its kind. It has three, sharp tips, but the curve on the outer two prongs is deeper, and the center prong is the longest of the trio. Instead of a smooth single pole as the stem, the trident twists, briefly separating into two spiraling rods which merge back together at the bottom.

Combined from the melted tridents previously carried by Kai, Murphy, and Serena's best friend, Ervin, the gold is mixed with magnesium alloy, a rare metal extracted straight from seawater that takes a lifetime to collect.

Murphy clasps his hands together and bends down on one knee. Serena places her foot in his palms and he stands, hoisting her up to one of the higher coves meant for sleeping guards.

She pulls herself in then leans out to grab her trident as Murphy passes it up.

He holds onto it a tad longer than he has to. "You've been warned to keep your trident by your side."

"I've had plenty of warnings, Murphy Air-Spirit," Serena yanks the trident from his hand. "You can't expect a girl to remember them all." Serena runs the pad of her thumb over a mark etched into the stem of her trident. It is a double circle—the shape above smooth and whole, and the shape below choppy. A full moon and its shadow falling upon the ocean. It is Moon-Shadow, and it is her mark.

"A girl, no…" Murphy backs away from the wall. "But the same does not apply to an Undine queen." A few moments pass while he stands, still looking up at her. "Are you going to assign me a mission, too?" he asks. "To demonstrate my ability to serve my new queen?" His tone is higher and his words clipped, mimicking Nerin's voice. He is trying to lighten Serena's mood, and it works.

She smiles, thinking of the middle-aged maidens. "Murphy, you could fail every mission I give you and still hold the hearts of most of the Undine."

"The very reason why we need to hold up appearances of being paired," he winks at her.

Serena sighs, rolling over on her back and taking her trident with her. "Between you and your mother, you are going to make a great queen out of me."

Murphy rests his hand on the edge of her sleeping cove. His voice goes soft. "You already are a great queen, Serena. But not everyone can see that yet." His hand drops and Serena hears light footsteps brush over hard rock across her chambers to a smaller adjoining cave, one that has been Murphy's living area for as long as Serena has been alive.

"Thank you, Murphy," she whispers to herself.

Chapter Five

Serena walks down the short tunnel, dragging the walls with the pads of her fingers. It is some sort of comfort after a long night in the king's chamber. Murphy's chamber was dark when Serena climbed down from her nook. He was probably out making rounds after only a few hours of sleep. Yawning, Serena pauses to stretch just before the tunnel opens up into the Great Hall. It is unfortunate timing. The two guards at the entrance come to attention and make a coordinated, precise turn to face the queen just as Serena is in mid-stretch, her trident overhead, and her face contorted into a lopsided, open-mouthed yawn.

One of the guards begins his bow too quickly and the other hesitates before giving his. The result is a pair of bobbing heads like buoys in rough waves. Snapping her mouth shut quicker than she can bring her hands down, Serena is left with a pressing lump in her throat of a suppressed yawn. She tries swallowing it down before she speaks.

"I'll assume you are my escorts for the day?"

They both nod.

"Murphy is assigning two of you now?"

They nod again.

"I see…" *It will be much more difficult to give two guards the slip when I feel the urge to surface.* "Well, have you eaten yet today?"

Two vigorous nods.

Serena crosses her arms, staring them down. She won't let Murphy bully everyone, especially when he isn't even present.

The nods slow and stop until the guards begin to shake their heads.

"Well, come on. We can all visit Rayne together."

The walk to Serena's childhood home—the orphanage turned diner—doesn't bring back any nostalgic memories. Everything has changed, right down to the two brawny guards trailing either side of her. The hall that is traditionally left empty is now packed with Undine, entering or leaving Rayne's diner. Maidens squeeze themselves against the wall as Serena passes, barely able to make room for the queen and her entourage.

Inside the main dining hall of the orphanage, the long wooden table that once served dozens of orphans now holds twice the amount of adult Undine, laughing, gossiping, and passing food bowls amongst one another. They sit shoulder to shoulder on the benches running alongside the table. Smaller, round tables now line the edges of the room in order to seat more.

Steam and smoke bellows out of the kitchen from the cooking fires, carrying with it the smell of clean water—a touch briny—and cooked seaweed, making Serena's stomach rumble. Rayne bustles through the steam to place another bowl of noodled kelp on the table. Hands reach for the slightly crunchy, almost translucent cuisine and Rayne deftly bats them away.

"Spoons, maidens. I'll not have you grabbing at my creations like a horde of ravenous crabs." Rayne turns down her lips at the group but gives an appreciative nod when they each grudgingly reach for their utensils. Rayne's eyes float up, spotting Serena, and her mouth turns into a full-on grin.

Weaving her way in between tables and chairs, Rayne walks toward Serena with open arms. At the last second, Rayne remembers her place and bends in a curtsey instead. The smile is still wide on her face. She gestures to the long table. "I still don't understand why the sudden push to use Ungainly instruments."

"It's just…a precaution is all," says Serena. She doesn't necessarily want to reveal she is training her people to live above ground—at least not yet.

"It's unnatural," grumbles Rayne.

Serena smiles. "Nonetheless, thank you for helping implement the policy, and thank you for not making clear it was my guidance."

Rayne crosses her arms.

"Besides," says Serena. "They aren't all that complicated. They’re spoons." She sighs, watching one of the maidens look at her upside down reflection in the utensil while running her fingers through her hair.

"Perhaps I should…" Serena takes a step toward an empty spot at the table. That small movement draws all eyes, and the maidens stand upright so quickly one of the benches tips over.

Serena goes tense, drawing her shoulders back into her spine. Eyes darting from one maiden to the next, the entire room is at a standstill, unsure of how to handle the awkward situation Serena has just created. She

remembers they rarely saw the king off of his throne—and now here is the queen, ready to dine with them.

Rayne clears her throat. "Um, your majesty—right this way, please."

Turning on her heel, Serena follows Rayne to a table set up one step above the rest of the room in a small, carved-out nook. The tension deflates in the dining hall behind her.

"You aren't one of them anymore, Serena." Rayne pulls out a chair for her.

"I never really was." It is Serena's turn to grumble as she sits down. She tries balancing her trident across her lap but it sticks too far out from the under the table. Next she tries leaning it against the table, but it keeps tipping to one side or the other. Serena raises her eyebrow at Rayne. *See!?*

Sighing, Rayne takes the trident. "Ronan already thought of that." She leans it into a small, carved out notch at the back of the table. Rayne returns her own raised eyebrow. "A Queen does not have to go it alone. There are those that will look out for you, if you'll just let them. Now, I'll go get you some food." Rayne turns on her heel and bustles away before Serena can object.

"The guards too, please," Serena shouts after Rayne.

Returning with a plate full of steaming food, and one bowl of sea-lettuce soup, Rayne sets them down in front of Serena and takes the chair opposite her. Serena picks up her own spoon, glancing at the guards who are each balancing a small plate and eating while standing.

"This is something new." Serena pokes at a clump of thin, dried algae that looks like twigs.

"Hijki," says Rayne. "You put them in your soup."

Serena pinches a few off the top and drops them in her bowl. They expand as they soak. Serena spoons some into her mouth. The Hijki is still somewhat crunchy and it adds a vibrant mix of salty and sweet to the soup.

"It's good, very good," says Serena, taking another bite. She gestures to the open room, buzzing with low chatter. "So, what have you heard?"

The old orphanage isn't just a place for Undine to grab a quick bite. It is a common meeting area to catch up with neighbors away from the formalities of the Great Hall, and Rayne is privy to all the information.

"Everyone is mostly chattering about the missions you will assign the council, and how it will affect their personal lives," says Rayne.

"Good," mumbles Serena. "It will keep their minds off the werewolves."

Rayne gives Serena a pointed look. "That is one problem that is not easily solved."

"Easier than getting this salmon into me, I hope." She flicks her spoon at a nori roll on her plate. It unravels, revealing thin strips of raw salmon inside.

Rayne's lips go tight. "The plants around the kingdom are becoming more and more limited, Serena. They are *dying*. You are going to have to get used to eating something else sooner or later. We all will."

Serena holds up a flabby, pale pink strip of meat, wiggling it in front of her face. Her mouth turns down in distaste. "If the corals go, so do the fish. So unless we are willing to migrate, we are going to have to figure something else out."

"We've tried that before, Serena. You were too young to remember, but maidens got very sick in other waters. Some even died." Rayne picks up a spoon, turning it in her fingers watching light refract off the smooth silver. She snorts. "Seems we do better in The Dry than in other waters."

"Exactly," says Serena, making a pointed glance at the spoon. Leaving the salmon untouched, Serena finishes the rest of her meal in silence under Rayne's watchful eye. Finally, Serena pushes her chair back, stands, and grabs her trident.

"We need to start growing herbs and vegetables again. Have you seen Sarafina yet today?" Serena glances around the room, the Head Gardener won't be far from the Great Hall.

Collecting the dishes from the table, Rayne shakes her head. "No—but, what do you plan to do? We can't grow in The Dry with the wolves patrolling."

"We have to find some way to make it work," says Serena, catching the attention of the guards who wolf down the last morsels on their plates.

"I'm thinking that is too much for you to take on," says Rayne, handing one of the guards Serena's leftovers.

"A job for Sarafina, then." Serena smiles, already walking out and debating to herself if she should break the news to the Head Gardner or if Nerin should.

"Have a good day, your majesty!" Rayne calls out after her.

Serena turns, almost forgetting the formalities. "Thank you, mother Rayne—your creations were delicious as usual."

They curtsey to each other. For a second, Serena almost feels like she is a child back in the orphanage, playing a make believe game of royalty. The illusion is pulled out from under her like a rug once she realizes every eye in the dining hall is on her. Serena clears her throat, addressing the rest of the Undine. "Carry on and…try the Hijki."

Serena turns on her heel, trusting the guards' heavy footsteps behind her to drown out any snickers.

Chapter Six

The swim to the archives takes Serena and her guards around the backside of the Undine mountain, on the western side of Vancouver Island. The majority of the path is surrounded by dead coral forests. Refusing to let any Undine ignore the problem further, Serena slows down while they swim over the cavernous wasteland. The guards are uncomfortable and keep inching forward. Each time their heads move level with Serena's shoulders, she glares until they fall back into position.

I won't be bullied into ignoring the problem either.

When they reach the narrow tunnel leading up into another mountain and the archives, Serena motions for the guards to stay behind. They oblige, partly because there is no other exit from the archives, but most likely because they don't feel like passing through the small tunnel on full stomachs.

Navigating her way through the tunnels, with darkness all around her, and the walls squeezing in, Serena feels freedom. A wide grin spreads across her face. Shoulders back, duck head, tight turn to the right. Maneuvering in the pathway took some relearning with her new trident, but the archives are always worth the trip.

As the end nears, Serena pins her arms and her trident to her side. Rolling her body as efficiently as a wave, Serena propels herself faster. Dimmed light from the archives entrance cavern blinks into view. One last thrust with her fins, and Serena breaks free from the water. She tucks her body into a tight ball, doing one summersault and then opening up again as she reaches the apex of her jump. Her fingers reach out toward the cave ceiling and just barely scrape hard rock.

Smiling briefly, Serena bends at the waist, piking for the dive back in. She straightens her body just as she enters the water, barely making a splash. When she resurfaces, it is only her head bobbing out. She can't get out of the water quickly enough, excited that she is finally able to touch the ceiling. Her own little challenge—one she had been practicing for months.

Transforming from fins to legs, Serena pulls herself out and throws on the robe and slippers required to enter the archives. She leaves her trident standing against the wall.

"Mariam!" she calls, struggling to get her arms in the robe. Serena stops by the catalogues, tying the sash around her waist. "Mariam!"

"Tsk, tsk," Kai comes from around one of the large columns with his finger to his lips.

Serena smiles, closing the distance between them quickly. His raised eyebrow stops her in her tracks. He nods his head to the other side of the library, and Serena follows his gaze. Cordelia sits at a table, bent over a book, with Mariam behind her pointing out passages as they both read.

"She actually came…" whispers Serena.

Both of the maidens look up. Caught off guard, Serena gives a slight wave. Mariam knits her eyebrows together, and shoos Serena away with a quick gesture so Cordelia cannot see. Serena nods, pulling Kai out of their view.

"Look," Serena says, holding up her scratched finger.

"What?"

"I did it, I touched the ceiling in the entrance cavern." She pushes up on her toes, then settles into her heels just as quick, unable to contain her excitement.

Kai smiles, and the hard line of his chin and cheekbones soften. He leans in, so Serena is forced to take a step back straight into one of the cave walls. The nook carved out to hold books is too big. Some of the books scrape as they are pushed further into the nook.

"You are still obsessed with touching the ceiling? I thought you gave up on that."

Serena's finger still wavers in the air between them. She bites her lip. "I need some fun in my life."

Kai's mouth turns down in a teasing frown. "Come on, Serena, you can think of something better than that." He kisses her finger, his warmth running down her arm and straight into her belly.

Her body goes slack, giving in before she really needs to. She sinks further into the books as he continues to press forward.

"Come on, Kai – a queen sometimes needs help, too."

"You want me to show you how to have fun?" His lips are inches from hers now. The ridges forming the top of his lips brush across hers.

"You have my permission," she whispers back.

He closes the distance, lips pressing into hers. Serena flattens her hands on the cave wall behind her back, using it to push forward into him. He doesn't give, meeting with the same intensity.

She allows her hands to creep up his sides, tugging at the robe he wears. She paws at the thick fabric folds, desperate to find his warm skin underneath. When she finally finds her way in, she feels scales, not skin.

"Tsk, tsk," she mimics him. "No scales allowed in the library."

"Your majesty," he mumbles into her hair, his lips grazing her neck up to her ear. Chills run down her spine. Slowly, he retracts the scales underneath her fingertips. As her finger glides up following the curve of muscle over abdomen, more scales retract.

Encouraged, Serena places both hands under his robe, palms pressing against him. Up and down his front, around his sides, and over his chest. His scales disappear at her touch until there is only skin.

She looks up into his eyes, forest green muted with flecks of golden brown around the edges. Serena suddenly can't stand what little space is between them. She wants Kai, and she wants all of him. Leaning in until their lips touch again, Serena wraps her arms around his waist. Her leg rises slightly and snakes around the thick of his calf. She can feel his hand gripping the back of her neck, holding her in place.

A loud cough signals another is approaching. Their eyes fly open in only a moment of hesitation before they jump apart. By the time Mariam rounds the corner, Kai and Serena have their backs to each other studying the spines of the books in front of them with vigor.

Mariam crosses her arms at the pair. "I don't mind opening up the archives for your secret affair, but the least you could do is keep it under wraps while someone else is present," she hisses, glancing at Kai's open robe.

Kai follows her gaze down, then fumbles with his sash, cinching the robe closed. Behind him, Serena is quickly trying to realign the books on the shelf that reveal the outline of her thin form.

"She entered the King's Library?" Serena asks Mariam, changing the subject.

Taking a cue for his dismissal, Kai wanders out from the shelves.

Mariam waits for him to go, then nods. "She did."

"How is she taking it?"

"She has a lot of questions, particularly those that involve maidens abandoning their sons."

Serena fixes the last book, then turns to look at Mariam. "Some think this is a mistake—that it will stress her so much that the delivery won't be successful."

Stepping toward Serena, Mariam places a hand on her shoulder. "Some are stuck in the past. Which is why you are equipped—better than any—to lead us. Don't doubt yourself, girl." Mariam's rounded brown eyes gleam with intensity.

Serena doesn't say anything, but nods her head.

"Okay…" says Mariam, not entirely reassured. "Why don't you go talk to her?" She moves aside and nudges Serena forward.

Still fighting off heat waves from kissing Kai, Serena takes a deep breath. She walks toward Cordelia hunched over a book at the table, and is grateful Kai has found something else to do within the archives, out of sight.

"Thank you," Serena says. "For taking my offer to access the restricted section."

Cordelia looks up at Serena, eyes wide. "Oh, yes your majesty." She coughs. "Of course."

Serena sighs, and pushes a chair next to Cordelia. Her old caste mate stiffens, as though she might jump out of her own chair.

"We aren't holding court, no need for formalities," assures Serena as she sits down. "I just want to talk."

Cordelia swallows, and nods. "Okay." Her eyes wander down to the book and she closes it.

There are not elaborate etchings or jewels on the cover. Serena knows what it is about— werewolves.

"Maidens did not have it easy back then," Cordelia says, giving a nervous laugh.

"Poseidon's Curse," Serena says. "You can ask Mariam about it. Almost all available maidens were required to participate in a selection and a pairing, and so many of them lost their calflings."

"I don't understand," Cordelia runs one hand down the braid at the nape of her neck. "Why did it all happen?"

"The environment changes. When we couldn’t keep our male calflings alive in the water, we came up with another solution."

"But, werewolves?"

Serena nods, tracing the edges of the old book with her thumb. "Our own children, our only hope, who became our protectors and then…"

"Our destroyers," Cordelia finishes for Serena.

Images from books depicting the night of the Maiden's Massacre flash through Serena's head.

"Listen, Cordelia." Serena places a hand over her former caste mate's arm. "There is a lot at stake here, and others will try to push their will onto you. If you aren't careful, you will drown under them. I wanted you here because you have to know all the facts, and all that you might face in just a few short months. These are your choices."

"Thank you, Seren—er, your majesty." Cordelia swallows hard.

Serena smiles. "I know, it still sounds so weird."

The maidens each give a nervous laugh, interrupted when a small piece of paper folded into itself lands on the table between them.

Serena grabs the note, looking up directly into one of the ceiling shafts filtering sunlight into the cave during the day.

"What is it?" Cordelia asks.

Brushing bits of cave debris off the note, Serena glances at Cordelia. "Whatever it is, it came from The Dry."

Serena slowly unfolds the paper.

We need to meet. Moonrise tomorrow.

Drawn in the corner of the slip of paper is a small, yellow wolfsbane flower.

Serena looks at Cordelia, eyes wide. "It's from Liam."

Chapter Seven

"Absolutely not. No way." Kai crosses his arms and lifts his nose in the air, channeling Murphy.

"I'm pretty sure it will be safe," Serena points to the small flower sketched into the corner of the note. "It's like…a signal for peace."

"How do you know it isn't a trap?" asks Kai.

"Liam could be on their side, Serena," says Mariam, taking a softer stance next to Kai, but a stance nonetheless. "Or they could be using him to get to you. Or—"

"How would you go anyway?" Cordelia asks, still sitting at her table in front of an open book.

All three heads turn her way.

"I mean," she shrugs. "Even if the note were genuine, he can't expect you to just walk out on the shore with the patrols spotting you."

"How she gets there doesn't matter because she is not going," Kai's words float past Serena like background noise.

She looks down at the note, studying it. Cordelia is right, there has to be some clue.

Serena peers closer at the flower, holding it up to what light is left shining through the same hole the note came down. The stem has odd, diagonal lines penciled in.

"Rope," says Serena, interrupting Kai. She looks up at the narrow tunnel burrowed into the ceiling, past the mirrors reflecting the light. "He'll send rope the same way he sent his note."

"Oh, of course," smirks Kai. "Because those tunnels are way too small to send any of the guardsmen up with you. It's perfect." He throws up his hands, walking away. He pauses, turning back around. "You aren't going—and that is final, your majesty."

This time his use of her title isn't sexy at all, it is outright infuriating. "He is my twin brother, Kai Forest." Serena raises her voice, allowing her hair's bioluminescent glow to light up in agitation. "And werewolf or no, he is the only family I have left." Her voice cracks at the word 'family', and Serena can see Kai's eyes transform from angry slits to sympathetic

ovals. It hurts Serena more than anything, because she knows he wants to be closer—he wants to *be* her family.

"Come on." Serena glances up at Kai. "Let's at least go tell Murphy."

Serena says her goodbyes to first Mariam, then Cordelia, trying to recall an air of formality and reserve before she has to report back to the Great Hall. Leaving together, Serena follows Kai out of the archives. They pause to de-robe, turning their backs to each other. As much as Serena wants to watch, she keeps her eyes steady on the dripping stalactites. If she squints hard enough, she thinks she can make out the scrape of her fingernail driven into the grime of the ceiling next to the sun hole.

Behind her, she hears Kai's robe fall to the floor.

Focus, she thinks. *Not here, not now.*

He slips off his padded slippers, taking a painfully slow time about it.

You are a queen—act like it. Besides, you are still mad at him.

Finally, Serena hears a splash in the water. She lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Hanging up her own robe and slippers and retrieving her trident, Serena quickly dives in after Kai. She follows his light brown tail, sticking close and expecting him to lengthen the distance between them with his speed any moment.

Concentrating on the arduous turns and twists of the narrow tunnel, Serena arches her back, preparing for the hairpin curve above. It is one of the larger spaces of the path, but if you take it quickly enough momentum will carry you through the rotation. But just as she is whirling around at the bend, Serena slams into Kai, who is waiting as still as stone.

"Umph!" the air is forced from her lungs and her eyes go wide. Her trident floats to the bottom of the small cavern.

Before she can bounce back off of Kai, he grabs her arms, pinning her against him.

"What—?" she gasps, momentarily forgetting they are still underwater. Only bubbles come out.

Pressing through the agitated fizz, Kai takes Serena's mouth with his own. Serena squirms, unable to forget that either Cordelia or Mariam could come through any moment, not to mention the guards that are supposed to be waiting at the entrance.

Kai wraps his arms around her waist, propelling them both up to a small air pocket at the highest point of the space. When they break the surface, they are both breathing hard. It is dark, but Kai's green eyes are so

clear they almost glow. Within the constricting space, their foreheads touch.

"What are you doing?" asks Serena.

"If we can't be open about our relationship in front of others—if I have to guard every move I make around you, every glance, every expression—then I am going to steal as many moments with you as I can."

Under the water, Kai intertwines his fingers with Serena's. He brings one of her hands up, kissing her on the knuckles and allowing his lips to brush across them, his breath lingering on her pale skin. "Will you allow me these small indulgences, your majesty?" Miniscule water droplets cling to his lashes. He brings his hand to her hip and squeezes, waiting for her answer.

Running her other hand up his bared chest, Serena bites her lip and meets his gaze, trying to convince herself to be as bold as Kai. Her fingers wrap around the nape of his neck and she pulls him even closer, the tip of her nose skimming across his. "As long as you promise to never call me 'your majesty' in private again."

She feels him move, tracking him by his breath against her cheek, then her ear. "Agreed," he whispers. "Serena…"

Her name on his lips sends chills racing through her body. She tilts her head back, meeting his mouth again. He presses his palms into the small of her back and she responds by wrapping her tail around his. Her spine heats under his touch. Flames flare up her shoulders and neck, fizzling out as they sink down into the cold, dark water together.

Pressed against each other, Serena opens her mouth and feels his tongue slide over her lower lip. Need overtakes her, and she wants more of him. She presses back, gripping him tight— almost frantic that he might pull away any second.

Their tails brush the rocky bottom of the passageway releasing trapped air pockets. Bubbles float up, tickling the pair with froth and foam. The effervescence fuels desire and Serena loses track of how long they are bonded together.

Finally, they draw apart. One more quick kiss on her cheek, and Kai bends to retrieve both their dropped tridents. He hands one to Serena and nudges her forward. Reluctantly, she allows herself to be guided through the rest of the tunnel first. Occasionally reaching out to tease the tips of

her fins, Kai's distraction causes Serena to lose focus and she bumps into the walls more often than her first time in the tunnel.

Lighter waters ahead come into view, and by the time Serena emerges she has small scrapes along her shoulders and back. They help to rein in the raging fire still burning in her stomach, chest, and head. The icy ocean water does its part, too. By the time they exit the tunnel and face the guards standing watch, Serena is composed…mostly. Loose strands of hair float into her peripheral view as if they are waving and shouting out, 'look what she just did!' Frantically, Serena pushes them back, trying to smooth them down behind her ears.

A short shrill whistle rings out from behind Serena. The guards in front of her nod their heads at Kai's command, then turn and leave. Once they are out of eyesight, Kai moves in front of Serena, helping her tuck the loose strands back into her thick braid.

Smiling, Serena nods her thanks. They are close and Serena wants to kiss him all over again, but they are in the open now and have to be careful. Kai moves away, strong enough to allow the moment to pass. Serena frowns as realization of her weakness sets in.

Not good, she thinks as she watches Kai's back end swim away. *But at the same time, way too good to pass up.*

* * *

Once they are back into legs and walking the halls of Society, Serena slows her pace, pulling her shoulders back. Kai falls behind, trailing her like any guardsman would. Their presence is formal, but inside Serena deflates. She doesn't like hiding behind this mask almost all the time, especially next to Kai.

Heads bob as Undine bow into full curtseys when Serena moves by. Passing another hallway, Serena hears a slight grunt. She retraces her steps, Kai moving back almost in synchronization.

The oldest male undine stands against a wall, arms crossed.

"You speak Ronan?" whispers Kai.

"Fluently," answers Serena. "Come on, he has something to show us."

The pair follow Ronan to the smoky room of the armory.

Formalities curtailed in the vacant workshop, Kai leans into Serena. "You don't suppose he’s going to let us hide behind the fire and—"

"Kai!" Serena elbows him in the ribs.

Ronan turns an ear but does not look at the couple. Instead he moves around his workbench, pulling at something on the ground. Kai follows to help, ushering the old Undine out of the way before giving one strong tug. Several translucent panes balanced on a wood contraption scoot into view.

"What are they?" asks Serena.

"Shields," answers Ronan. "To block the Ungainly weapons."

Serena curls her toes in, feeling the pain of a bullet ripping through her foot all over again. It wasn't the worst wound endured during the King's Massacre, but definitely not one she would be anxious to experience again.

Running his hand over the outside pane, then rapping on it with his knuckles, Kai smiles. "Bulletproof? How did you manage it? Have you tested them?"

Ronan runs a gnarled knuckle across his upper lip.

Serena smiles to herself, the old man cannot be made to answer quickly. Growing up, she bore witness to his evasion of Rayne's most severe interrogations.

"Alternating panes of glass and laminate," responds Ronan, his words gravelly.

Serena steps forward to touch the invention. "Amazing what you can find floating around in the ocean."

Ronan grunts.

Glancing at Kai, Serena pushes her luck. "We can use them, you know—for a visit to Liam."

"They wouldn't fit up the tunnels," Kai shakes his head.

"There are other ways to The Dry…"

Kai narrows his eyes.

"Just saying," shrugs Serena.

"What you choose to do with them is up to you," Ronan says, hoisting one upright. "But there are five of them."

Kai moves forward, poking and prodding at the glass, then testing its weight. "Can we put straps here, and shape them smaller?"

"To create shields?"

"Yes," says Kai. "Too cumbersome for running, but if we're trying to hold our ground, on say a beach…" he trails off.

The pair bend over one of the pieces, mumbling as they consult with each other.

Shifting impatiently from foot to foot, Serena huffs. "Kai, I have a meeting with the council. Shall I report that you are otherwise occupied?" she asks.

"Please do," Kai says, eyes still running down the edges of the gleaming glass.

"Okay," says Serena. "Be careful."

"Always am," Kai responds, finally looking at her.

"That's my line." Serena smiles, touching his shoulder lightly in farewell. It is all she will risk, or at least deem appropriate, in the presence of Ronan.

Chapter Eight

"I have your missions," Serena announces. She stands as part of a circle along with the rest of the council, minus Kai, in the middle of the Great Hall. Instituted by Serena almost right after she took the crown, the meeting setup is more productive than all of them craning their necks up at her on the throne. They tend to be more candid with her when she isn't surrounded by reminders of monarchs past. Besides, standing instead of sitting keeps conversations short and to the point. Even Evandre finds it harder to prattle on when she is shifting from foot to foot instead of sitting comfortably on her bum.

Sarafina clears her throat, glancing between Serena and Nerin. "I find it odd that after years and years of traditional leadership policies, we are suddenly doing things differently. I'm sure that—"

"Years and years of tradition?" interrupts Serena, her jaw clenched and her hand squeezing the trident by her side. "The corals turn to skeletons around us, we haven't birthed a calfling in eighteen years, and yet you suggest we stay the course?"

"It doesn't mean we need to break *all* customs," Sarafina shoots back. "After all, look where it got the king."

"Are you blaming his death on me?" Serena raises her voice, squaring her shoulders with Sarafina. She flashes her trident in front of her, reminding Sarafina of her position.

Sarafina's eyes widen slightly as she attempts to recall decorum. "No, your majesty."

The moment passes, one that will most assuredly not be escaping any of the council members' memories any time soon.

"Forgive me for interrupting." Isadora steps into the circle, her black scales glittering like the cave minerals cast into the ceiling, giving an impression of the open night sky.

Everyone turns to look at her as she rarely speaks at council meetings.

"I believe the path the king chose was due to…several things. It was unfortunate, admirable, suspicious, and perhaps unavoidable.

Characteristics that seem to overshadow the lives of every noble family member." Isadora looks at Serena and smiles.

Serena steps back into place, nodding for Isadora to continue.

"You all know the legends; Alpheus, Leucothea, and Proteus. And don't forget Dagon, the avenging devil of the sea. It seems King Merrick fell right into place in a long line of tragedies, but one that paves new paths for the Undine." Isadora turns in a slow circle, making sure to look each council member in the eye as she speaks. "And from what I've seen so far, Serena is bold enough to charge down that path, headfirst, with one goal in mind. Securing the future of the Undine. And if we, her trusted council, the collective leaders of Society, are not brave enough to follow…" Isadora pauses, turning to look at Sarafina and lowering her voice. "Then we are already doomed."

Sarafina's shoulders sag, silenced by a psychic and a seventeen-year-old queen.

Isadora lowers her eyes, then turns to Serena. "I understand you request words with me, your majesty. I will remain in my cave the rest of the day when you are ready to speak."

"Thank you, Isadora."

A talk with Isadora is long overdue. After the king's admission that Serena is the true heir, the tragedy of his death pushed aside the fact that Isadora is Serena's aunt—and the twin sister of Serena's mother, the deceased queen.

Isadora curtseys, then turns and takes her place back in the circle.

Nerin clears her throat. "As you were saying, your majesty—the missions?"

"Yes, thank you, Nerin." Serena turns to Sarafina and Evandre first, always standing side by side. "You are well aware of yours. The corals. Except now I require an update every third moon—"

"Will you have time for that your majesty?" Evandre interrupts. "I mean, you are difficult enough to pin down as it is."

Serena smiles. "Not an update to me, Evandre. An update to the rest of Society—or to all those who care to attend. They will be held here, in the Great Hall, at the setting of the moon. My presence is not required."

Evandre and Sarafina exchange a glance.

Serena turns to Zayla. "Zayla, with the graduation of the temporal caste, and no more students to teach, I have wondered what you do with your

time. It seems you have taken a liking to working with Rayne in the kitchens, working to feed the entirety of Society. It seems your desire to nurture has not escaped you."

Zayla nods slowly.

"I charge you, along with Hailey…"

Society's head doctor lifts her chin in response.

"…with ensuring Cordelia's success in birthing a healthy calfling and to furthermore increase our chances for more."

One corner of Zayla's mouth goes up in a wry smile "That is an awfully difficult position you put me in, your majesty," she says, looking at Serena, then Hailey. "But one that I would be honored to fulfill."

"Thank you, Zayla and Hailey. I will speak with you more on the subject later." Serena turns to Isadora. "And for Isadora, who manages to see all for who they truly are, I entrust the future of the Undine into your hands."

"The future of the Undine?" Isadora asks. "I can only see potential paths each life might take, not that of whole societies."

"I understand," Serena nods. "But I have to tell you that I suspect one of those potential paths might put every one of us in The Dry—permanently."

A chorus of resistance breaks out, the loudest of all is Evandre.

Isadora holds up one hand, and the group silences. "I've seen enough myself to believe it, and I will do as you say, your majesty." Isadora bobs her head in a curtsey again. She is being way more gracious than Serena has ever witnessed, even in front of the king.

"Nerin, my trusted Second," says Serena, motioning over her left shoulder. "We have already spoken on your duties. Nerin is charged with unity of the Undine. As word gets out about our prospective fate, as it no doubt will—" Serena glances at Evandre and Sarafina. "—we will become more divided than ever. We will need a peacekeeper, and Nerin has already played this role many times."

"As you say, your majesty," says Nerin. "Which leaves only the male members of the council left to task."

Serena clears her throat. She did not have time to talk it through with Nerin beforehand.

Murphy steps forward. "May I make a suggestion?"

Hesitating, Serena isn't sure she wants Murphy to assign his own duties. It would be unfair to the rest of the council members. She bites her lower

lip. *Are we going to butt heads again?*

"A suggestion as to Kai's duties," explains Murphy.

"Please—let's hear it." Serena says, releasing a slow breath.

Murphy comes to attention. Standing straight, he is two heads taller than anyone else there, and twice the width. "The safety of the queen should be his top priority."

Serena's heart quickens. *What is he doing? Does he know about the note from Liam already?*

"Although it is of course already the responsibility of the guard, the queen has proven a difficult…charge," Murphy says.

Careful, Murphy.

"And with the prospect of increased time in The Dry, I would feel more at ease with one specific individual shadowing her at all times."

At all times. Kai will be with me all the time. A part of her wants to jump up and hug Murphy, another part of her wants to slap him across the face. Kai will be within reach on a constant basis, but not being allowed to touch him in front of anyone else will be pure torture.

"Agreed," says Hailey, on Murphy's right.

Evandre and Sarafina are quick to jump in, followed by everyone else with a chorus of agreement.

Serena sighs. To deny him now would be to deny the entire council. Nerin nudges her, well aware of what Serena is considering. Hesitantly, Serena speaks. "Very well, Murphy. It will be so. And now that leaves your assignment." *And I am not going to take it easy on you.*

Murphy shifts from one foot to another. The movement is subtle, but Serena takes a moment to revel in it.

"I bequeath the Head of the Guard with safety of…everyone else," she says. "You are to patrol the borders of our kingdom yourself—at least twice daily, as well as make the rounds throughout personal caves. Ensure the kitchens are safe…and the armory."

His mouth drops open, and Serena smiles at his lapse in bearing.

"And Murphy—don't forget about the archives."

The mission will keep Murphy plenty busy and away from her and Kai so at least she won't have to deal with that awkward trio. Briefly, Serena thinks it may be too harsh, but then again, so was his suggestion.

Murphy steps back into line, his lips tight. "As you say, your majesty."

"Council adjourned," Serena snaps before there can be any disagreements. "We'll meet again tomorrow so you can present the outline of your plans to me. And Murphy? Please let Kai know I will be waiting for him in the archives at moonrise." Serena turns to Isadora. "I will speak with you now."

"As you say, your majesty. Please follow me."

Acknowledging the farewell curtsies of the rest of the council with a bob of her head, Serena falls in line behind Isadora. Her scales are as black as Serena's hair. As they leave the Great Hall, Isadora releases the scales along her shoulders and neck. The formal dress is not required out of court. Serena watches as Isadora's scales sink into pale white skin. There isn't a trace of blood as is common when other Undine retract their scales. Squinting closer, Serena can see a crisscross pattern of pinkish scars along her back and shoulders. It is the same pattern as her scales, as if she has done it so much, Isadora's skin is permanently marked.

Isadora flips her hair back behind her shoulder. The thick braid covers much of the scarring.

"You have never been to my chambers, your majesty?" Isadora asks, keeping her eyes forward as they walk deeper into the cave system.

"Just once, with my caste but other than that no, I…um, the necessity never rose. But I understand the king took your council."

"Some, but it was the queen that was always more open to my visions."

"Of course," says Serena.

"After my sister's death," Isadora continues, "the king saw me less and less. I think I reminded him too much of her…" Isadora trails off so Serena has to strain to hear the last few words. She parts the beaded curtain suspended from her door and gestures inside. "Please, let's talk."

Serena slides past Isadora, beads hitting her shoulders. The cave is dark and Serena stands in the middle as Isadora moves around lighting candles. Serena watches the psychic closely, studying her features and movements for some glimmer of recognition for the mother she doesn't remember.

"Please, take a seat," says Isadora.

Serena chooses a stool made out of driftwood and sits. The wood is surprisingly smooth at the seat.

"Dulse?" Isadora holds out a bowl of craggy, copper-colored, sheets. "I am told you don't eat enough."

Serena stiffens then declines the food.

Shurgging, Isadora pulls up her own stool in front of Serena and they both take a seat, slowly. The bowl of dulse sits in between them. "Your hand, please."

"Why?" asks Serena, curling her fingernails into her palms.

"It is my way," says Isadora, holding out her own hand.

No wonder my father stopped seeing her, thinks Serena. Nonetheless, Serena extends her own hand. It is immediately enveloped in rough, scratchy palms as Isadora begins to pry and massage each of the grooves surrounding Serena's knuckles.

"As you know, twins are extremely rare in Society," says Isadora. "The ancients have always said twins are a sign of change—for better or worse. We made quite the splash in Society, your mother and I." Isadora smiles to herself, still kneading away at Serena's hands. "Once we twins were born, our family's status was elevated. Dad was on the king's council, himself. So when it came time for the pairing, of course your mother and I were top picks. King Merrick, who was allowed to choose a mate at any time, mind you, went straight for your mother…" Isadora trails off, her hands going still.

Serena waits a moment, then attempts to bring her back. "What about you? Didn't you end up with someone?"

Isadora's drifting eyes snap back to Serena. "Me?"

Serena nods.

"After your mother was paired with the king, not many bothered to ask about me."

"You didn't answer the question, Isadora."

"No, I didn't." Isadora begins kneading again, but her movements are jerky and the tugging on Serena's fingers borders on painful. "I was paired."

"But you didn't want to be," encourages Serena.

"Well, now who is the psychic here?"

"I'm sorry." Serena says. "But you said you'd answer all my questions."

"Yes, well." Isadora straightens her back. "My mistake." She folds her hands in her lap, sighing. "No I didn't want to be paired. In fact, I made it very clear during the Choosing Ceremony. But with one twin already spoken for, the males were very persistent. I eventually gave in—Adrian was his name." Isadora lifts her chin and straightens her back. "He's dead now."

Serena narrows her eyes. "Why didn't you want to mate?"

"That…is a question that no one else has bothered to ask, not even your mother." Isadora slumps. She reaches out to trace the rim of the dulse bowl with her fingertips, but doesn't attempt to eat any more than Serena does. "It was because I saw what would happen to our sons if we did. I saw what would happen to *my* son." Tears begin to swell up as she shakes her head. "I became with calfling, and it happened anyway. He is no longer with us."

"I'm sorry, Isadora. I can't imagine what it must feel like to lose a child."

Isadora runs a shaky hand across her eyes. "Not quite what it feels like to lose a parent, I can tell you that much."

Serena nods, conceding the point. "Hopefully, we will not let Cordelia experience the same. Have any visions come to you on her or her calfling's future?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, they have." Isadora stands, folding her arms across her midsection, and walking away from Serena.

"Well?" prods Serena.

Isadora stops and looks over her shoulder. "It will be a difficult birth, Serena. And if not played out right, there is no future for her calfling."

Chapter Nine

After leaving the psychic's quarters, Serena doesn't have long to think about Isadora, or Cordelia, or complicated birthings. As soon as her shoulders cross the beaded curtain, Murphy, with two guards behind him, is at her side issuing orders.

"We need to convene the council," he says.

Serena turns on her heel, almost at the expense of getting run over by Murphy in the process. He stops short, but the pair are standing so close she has to crane her neck back to look him in the eye. "The council will be busy with their assigned missions," Serena responds. She pauses, considering which crisis he is actually referring to. "What is this about?"

"The note," he says.

"Oh…that," Serena waves a flippant hand in the air.

Taking a deep breath, Murphy pauses for a moment to calm himself. When he opens his eyes again, he steps back to lend space to Serena. "Apologies, your majesty, but in all my time serving the kingdom, no monarch has ever been so willing to put themselves in such danger."

"Then—"

"I cannot—I will not—allow that tradition to break while I stand guard," interrupts Murphy.

"I think—"

"The very idea is unfathomable," Murphy says, his voice loud. "When do you plan to even go?"

Serena's cheeks go hot with all the interruptions.

"Stand down, Murphy." Her words echo off the walls of the large, empty cavern, and the silence that ensues is even louder.

Serena is acutely aware that even the low whistle of the guards breathing behind him has ceased. "Please do not underestimate my understanding as to the gravity of the situation. We will work together on this, but if we want to help Cordelia, I must go to The Dry." Serena searches his eyes for some hint of comprehension. "She doesn't have much time left."

Murphy crosses his arms and raises his chin.

This isn't working, thinks Serena.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Murphy. The one thought running through my head right now is…how would the king have handled this situation?"

Murphy relaxes his stance a bit, his interest piqued.

"You know exactly what he would have done. He would have raised his voice, he would have slammed his trident into the ground, and he would have used every last ounce of his weight to push his agenda first."

Pausing for several seconds, Murphy gives the slightest nod, acknowledging the king's ruling style.

"But as you see, I don't have nearly the weight to throw around. And I will not bang my trident against the ground for fear it may actually hurt my wrist…"

Murphy smiles at this.

"…and I don't have the voice to scream and shout. Instead, they say I have my mother's voice—a singing voice."

The insides of his eyebrows lift in a small slip of grief at the mention of Serena's mother.

"There is one thing I do share with the king, and with you, even. The resolve to protect our people and ensure our survival. But I can't do that hiding away in caves." She takes a step closer to him, laying a gentle hand on his arm. "Let me do this, Murphy. Liam is my brother—I will be safe."

A moment more of silence and Murphy gives the slightest nod. "As you say, Serena." The informal name amidst the formal tone is not taken as an insult, but rather a sign of trust—like Liam's wolfsbane.

"Thank you," says Serena. "I will be standing by in the archives, waiting for Liam's rope when the time comes."

"But—"

"Shall we retire and converse on the subject after we've each had a chance to mull it over?" She turns her back to him, reveling at the opportunity to interrupt him. "I will need your guidance on this, Murphy."

"So be it." Murphy sighs, following her through the Great Hall to the small arched doorway leading to their joint quarters.

Murphy pauses in the Great Hall, giving assignments to the guardsmen and rotating their shifts.

Entering her chamber alone, Serena takes a deep breath to calm her nerves. Seeing Liam again will be somewhat of a welcome release. To her,

both Liam and the forest have always represented freedom from The Deep. It is a notion needed now more than ever in her new position.

But what news will he give her? So far, Alaric has not allowed the Undine to even approach the beaches, despite the king's sacrifice. It makes King Merrick's last brave and selfless gift to his daughter completely null and void.

The thought boils around in Serena's head, heating her cheeks again. Her hands began to shake, aching for an outlet to release her anger, and her breathing grows ragged.

Stop it, Serena tells herself. *You can't make any good decisions in this state.* She takes another deep breath, laying her trident against the king's bed and sitting herself until her hands stop shaking.

There are only a few moments of privacy. All too soon, Serena can hear heavy, but hesitant footsteps coming down the short corridor to her chamber.

Murphy must be in a mood. But is he in a mood to apologize, or to fight?

She stands quickly, folding her hands behind her. When his shadow grows long into her room, she glances at the floor. "Murphy, I'm—"

Interrupted by a clearing of the throat, Serena looks up.

Kai stands in the entrance, not Murphy. His wide green eyes don't wander around the room and he remains still, one foot slightly behind as if he may turn and bolt from the room. One hand jitters at his side.

"Kai…" is the only word Serena can think to say. He's never been in the room before, at least not with her.

Finally, he turns, squaring his shoulders with hers and committing to his place. "I am here as designated by my new mission," he says. "It looks like we'll be spending a lot of time together."

As he says it, high tide hits and ankle deep water rushes in, bathing the floor in velvety blue ocean. It mutes the immensity of the empty room, drawing the pair closer together even though neither one moves.

"This is about as high as the water gets," Serena says, folding her arms over her mid-section. "It doesn't reach the top of the bed."

Lame, thinks Serena. She forces her hands down to her sides again.

Kai smiles, flashing white teeth behind full lips, and all Serena can think about is kissing them.

This is going to be so hard.

"So…scales not needed," he says. Before the sentence is finished, the first of the light brown armor he donned in The Dry is retracted from his neck and shoulders. Underneath, his skin is darker than Serena's, like he has been at the surface too long. His frame isn't as broad as Murphy's, but it is wrapped in sinewy muscle. Kai is the fastest and most agile guardsmen Serena knows—and she has seen them all in action.

He walks toward her, scales disappearing at a rapid rate, leaving behind a solid chest and a defined abdomen.

A trickle of salt water follows the chiseled clefts in his midsection. The scales are so low, Serena can see his hip bones as he passes her. She peers out from behind one of the rock columns at the corner of her sleeping area. Armor disappears up his ankles and calves, the muscle underneath gliding up and down like the stealthy, calculated movement of a shark.

Serena's mouth drops open, one hand squeezing the rock at her side. *This is going to be very, very hard.*

"Is this good?" Kai asks.

"Huh? What?" She has to tear her eyes away from his legs, the scales have retracted all the way past his knees.

"Here—this sleeping nook. Is it okay if I sleep here?"

It is the very one Serena chooses every night, but for some reason she can't bring herself to say that. Instead, she nods, still hiding half her body behind the rock column. Her mouth feels bone dry.

Resting his trident against the wall, Kai hoists himself up to the sleeping nook. Serena retreats altogether behind the column as he has his back turned. She can hear him slide the rest of the way into the nook.

"Have I scared you off? You still there?"

"Hmm," she manages to mumble.

"Well then, goodnight Serena Moon-Shadow, Queen of the Undine."

There is a short pause while she swallows, coaxing her vocal chords to work. "Goodnight," she manages to squeak without looking at him again. She sits on the bed she has never before slept on, her fingertips still scraping across the rock.

Serena's eyes shoot back to the entrance as Murphy walks in, tall and cocky. Barely slowing down, he nods in her direction with a sly smile. "Sleep well, you two."

She narrows her eyes, her hands itching to go for his throat. He did this on purpose—knowing sleep will be almost impossible for her. Murphy

disappears into his adjoining chamber and Serena is again alone with Kai.

She scoots back on the bed, bringing her own trident with her. When she lies down, she keeps her eyes straight up, refusing to look at Kai until she has her breathing under control.

Instead, she stares at the etching of Poseidon who stares right back at her. She can't help but remember her time in prison. She feels like she is in prison now, or even worse than prison. She is under constant scrutiny. There are always eyes watching and they are more judgmental than Serena guesses Poseidon's ever were. Now with Kai in the room, she isn't even free to pace, nor to toss and turn in the oversized bed—not without having to answer his questions.

As the candles in the room begin to sputter out, one by one, Poseidon's eyes glow back at Serena. She would love to ask him some questions. *How would you deal with Alaric? Would he even dare betray you? If I sacrifice myself to the wolves, who would lead the Undine into The Dry when the ocean grows too poisonous for them?*

In the course of a never-ending list of worries running through her head, the minerals that make up Poseidon's eyes begin to twinkle. One eye more so than the other, so that it looks like the sea god is winking at her. Serena thinks of Arista, the other prisoner released when Cordelia helped Serena escape. Arista hasn't been seen or heard of since, though the guards have been searching when time allows.

Just add it to the list, Serena thinks, sighing and turning on her side. She curls into her trident, running her finger over where the three prongs are melded onto the stem.

"Do you always sleep with your weapon?"

Serena freezes, amidst her rambling thoughts she almost forgot Kai was there. It is difficult to discern his detailed features in the dimming light, but Kai is lying on his side looking at her, his shoulder rising and falling with slow, controlled breath. Slowly taking her hand from the trident and tucking it under her side, Serena bites her lip, hoping he can't tell she is doing it. "My weapon usually stands where yours does right now. I prefer sleeping in the smaller nooks; they remind me of home."

Kai pats the hard rock beneath him. "There is plenty of room still."

She can almost see the smile on his face.

"Not for me *and* the trident—which would definitely have to be in between us should we share the same nook."

Kai laughs out loud. It fades away and the room falls into a comfortable silence.

After a few minutes, Kai breaks it with a soft voice. "Why did you task me with guarding you—as my mission?"

"I didn't."

"Oh," says Kai, disappointment tingeing his remark.

"It was Murphy," Serena turns on her back, staring at Poseidon again. He reminds her of Murphy, all bulky muscle and chiseled features, but she doesn't see the allure that other Maidens do. "I think it might be him finally consenting to our union, or at least a step in that direction."

"Well…"

"Well what?" Serena asks.

"I might have had words with Murphy about it."

"What kind of words?" Serena props herself up on her elbow, staring at Kai.

"You know, heated…words."

"Kai! What did you tell him?" Serena knew all too well that if you pushed Murphy too hard in one direction, he'd push back ten times as hard.

Kai shrugs. "I just let him know I am reconsidering my position as Second in Command."

"What? Why?"

"I think it holds complications if we are ever to have an open relationship together. Anyway, he wasn't too happy about it."

"You'd give that up to be with me?"

Kai props himself up on one elbow too, looking at Serena. "Would you give up the crown for me?"

She almost laughs out loud. "Kai, if I could give up the crown, it would have been done not long after it was given to me. But for all the reasons to do it, you are at the top of the list."

More candles have flickered out, and now Serena can't see Kai at all. She nestles her head into the crook of her arm, scooting her trident close to her.

"You should name it," Kai says, so softly Serena can barely hear him.

She rests her hand gingerly over the stem of the weapon. "Did you name yours?"

"Yes, but…it's sort of personal."

"Okay, I'll think about it."

"And Serena?" asks Kai.
"Yes?"
"Stop biting your lip."

Chapter Ten

Serena tosses and turns most of the night. The combination of the oversized, unfamiliar bed of rock, and the cold weapon may have something to do with it, but she can’t help but keep glancing over at Kai. He is very still through the night, almost annoyingly so.

Doesn't he at least snore? Serena thinks with contempt. *Oh no, do I snore?* She clamps her hand over her mouth as if a snore might escape any moment. Yet another reason not to fall asleep. Even so, exhaustion sets in and as the last of the tide trickles out, Serena drifts off to a restless sleep, dreaming of wolfsbane and walking, talking tridents.

Once she blinks her eyes open again, the candles are re-lit and the room is bathed in a soft light. She hears a shuffling behind her and her eyes fly open, darting to Kai's unoccupied nook.

"Don’t worry, still here," he says from the other side of the room.

Serena sits up. "I wasn't worried, I was…" *hopeful*. But she doesn't say it out loud.

After lighting two more candles, Kai gestures to the end of the bed. "Rayne made us something to eat."

Yawning, Serena grabs her trident and scoots down to the end of the bed, next to a plate of food. Kai meets her, sitting down on the other side of the plate. His fingers pop as he stretches and yawns; he is not nearly as tense as Murphy always is around the bed.

Serena catches herself staring at his calves. They are scaled once again, and she isn't sure if she is relieved or disappointed.

"Eat," urges Kai.

Glancing down at the plate, Serena finds half of it is covered in salmon bits. *Oh no, is he going to try to force fish down my throat, like Rayne does?* "It's a lot."

Kai smiles, turning the plate so the fish is on his side and the vegetables are on hers. "We'll share, then."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Serena picks up a strip of agar-agar. The almost translucent strip of red algae turns to jelly in her mouth. Slightly sweet and a little salty, it is one of her favorite breakfast treats.

"Hungry?" Kai asks.

Serena glances down to find she has finished her side of the plate, but Kai is slurping up the last of the fish bits, too. "So…" he puts his arms behind him, leaning back on the bed. "What do you want to do now?"

Serena feels giddy. She runs the pad of her finger along the smooth edge of the plate. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

He shrugs. "Well, the council is in the Great Hall, waiting for you."

"The council?!" Serena practically shrieks as she jumps from the bed. "Why didn't you say something?" She brings forward more scales so they climb up her neck right to her chin. Her formal garb for the Great Hall.

"You needed to eat," Kai furrows his eyebrows, confused, as if it is a silly question.

The jolt back to reality is annoying. A moment ago, the pair were acting as if they had an entire day ahead of them with endless possibilities. Now Serena needs to face the council and already someone is nagging about her eating habits.

"Do they know you are in here?" she asks.

"A few saw me walk in with the tray," Kai stands, handing Serena her trident and grabbing his own. "But you are my assignment now, so they might as well get used to it. Right?" He winks at her.

"Right," she says, squeezing her trident as a flutter moves from her stomach to her chest. "Just—try not to do that when I'm standing in front of them."

"Do what?" Kai asks, following her down the short tunnel to the Great Hall.

"You know very well what," Serena hisses back. His winks, smiles, and general gestures throw her off her game too easily.

"As you say, your—"

Serena gives a low, guttural grunt as a warning.

"I mean," corrects Kai, "Serena." He swoops around in front of her, causing Serena to stop short. Bending in a sweeping bow, he lifts her free hand and kisses her on the knuckles.

There, in the shadowed hallway between the Great Hall and the royal chambers, Kai presses his lips to Serena's hand gently, yet insistently. He runs his thumb over her knuckles then stands.

"There—that should get us through the day." Spinning on his heel, he steps into the light of the Great Hall and bellows. "Make way for the

queen!"

It is completely unnecessary, as only the council stand in the Great Hall. Low mutters of conversation die down. Murphy openly rolls his eyes at Kai.

"Make way I said!" Kai yells at Hailey, who looks thoroughly confused, practically on the other side of the room.

She takes a step back anyway.

"Thank you, Kai," Serena says, coming up next to him. She lowers her voice, "if you'll just cut it out—now…"

"As you say." He doesn't smile, though she can see the humor in his eyes. The green shade almost twinkles with laughter.

She clears her throat, trying to keep her cheeks from flushing. "Good morning," she says to the council.

"Good morning, your majesty," they echo in disjointed harmony.

"Any urgent matters?" Serena asks, approaching the group.

"Each of the council members special missions have been announced to Society," says Nerin. "There is a general feeling of…concern as to why these assignments have taken place."

See, it's working already, thinks Serena. "Thank you, Nerin. I will address it directly with the people during next Assembly." Serena turns to Evandre and Sarafina. "Your report on the corals?"

Evandre remains silent, looking at Serena down her long nose.

Sarafina's mouth drops open. "A report? There's been no time. I haven't even been to see them yet—"

"Not been to see them?" Serena's eyes grow wide, and Nerin's spine goes stiff enough for the both of them. "What have you been doing?"

"As…as the head gardener, there are matters to oversee, food is growing scarce and—"

"Food is growing scarce because our corals are dying!" Serena slams her trident down on the rocky floor. The echo booms throughout the cave, reminding her of her father's temper. Most of the council shuddered when he brought the trident down.

This time, they do not.

Instead, they look at her with wide eyes and lips pressed tightly together.

Breathe Serena, she thinks. *You cannot rule with pure aggression.*

Closing then opening her eyes, Serena looks at Sarafina. "If you fail to reap food from the oceans, you'll need to start new gardens in The Dry. You can speak to Hailey and Rayne about which seeds you have to work with."

"Me? Go into The Dry? After all that's happened?" She asks, almost frantic. "How could I possibly be expected to make the journey enough to successfully grow a garden, and live to tell about it?"

Serena smiles. "Tell me Nerin, did the king hold a vote with the council on whether or not to name me Werewolf Liaison during The Choosing?"

"He did," Nerin folds her hands in front of her, looking at Sarafina.

"And may I venture to guess that Sarafina's vote was yes?"

Sarafina's eyes dart from Nerin to Serena, like a half moon perch evading a shark.

"It was," answers Nerin.

"And thus I will extend the same courtesy," says Serena. "It is your turn to give it a try."

"As you say, your majesty," Sarafina's voice is so tight, Serena swears she must be gritting her teeth.

"Any more reports?" Serena asks the rest of the group.

"You didn't ask the status of my assignment," Kai raises his hand, eyebrows lifted in an effort to look eager, but Serena can see the twinkle in his eye.

"As long as I am standing before you, alive and well, I give permission for you to omit your report, Second in Command."

"As you say, your majesty."

Out of the corner of her eye, Serena can see Sarafina purse her lips in a pout. Serena opens her mouth to say something, but Isadora interrupts.

"A word, your majesty?" asks Isadora.

Serena starts with Isadora suddenly by her side. "Oh, yes. Um, the council is adjourned."

Isadora motions to the side of the room. "As you may or may not know—depending on how studious you were during your divination sessions in school, positive energy is almost essential in foreseeing the future."

"Yes." Serena nods. "I remember something like that." During her visit to Isadora's cavern, Serena had been more interested in the various jarred substances on the shelves than in Isadora's lecture.

"Then you may remember that hydrocoral, the orange shade similar to the Sunbeam family color, is vital for dispersing negative energy."

Serena has seen the decline herself in the disintegration of the coral forests. There is barely any hydrocoral left, like the Sunbeam family.

"It makes it very difficult for me to foresee the future," Isadora's voice has gone high.

Serena turns her full attention to Isadora. Her long, slender fingers are as jittery as her voice. Narrowing her eyes, Serena can see small wisps of hair escaping from Isadora's braids.

"Are you okay, Isadora?" Serena steps toward her, lowering her voice. The woman looks bone-tired and wrought with worry. For a moment, Serena feels a pang of loss for her mother. Sisterly empathy, wisdom, and support might just be what Isadora needs. Unfortunately, Serena doesn't do empathy very well.

"Me?" Isadora gives a nervous laugh. "Yes, child… er, your majesty. Please forgive me." Isadora bends to curtsey then hesitates, as if she is unsure it is the right thing to do.

Serena frowns, suddenly wishing she would have told Liam about Isadora, and that maybe she should tell Isadora about Liam. Just the knowledge that more family is out there might make all the difference.

Isadora finally decides to complete the awkward curtsey. She takes a deep breath, smoothing black scales down her midsection. "To be honest, hydrocoral is also used in the transformation potion. Which may or may not be needed directly after Cordelia's labor."

Serena nods. "Let me speak with Hailey, and see how much time we have. We'll come up with a solution."

If it were up to Serena, no transformations will ever take place again. But if the newborn calflings are dying, there might not be a choice.

"Thank you, your majesty. Time is of the essence, of course." She puts her fingertips of one hand to her temple. "Time grows short for everyone. As you know, the full moon—and your eighteenth birthday—are within the week. It is Alaric's deadline. Do you think he will honor the deal, then?"

Tiny, iridescent scales along Isadora's black body armor emerge, then disappear just as quickly. It is a sign of stress, the body's natural reaction to ward away danger. Serena is able to see her own image reflected in Isadora's scales, her black hair is the same shiny color. A disjointed thought about the colors that run within families comes to Serena.

Sometimes it is obvious, like the Sunbeam family and their bright orange scales. Sometimes it is more subtle, the color transferring as with Isadora's scales and Serena's hair. But no one else carries the inky black they do. Serena hasn't seen it anywhere else except…a cautionary thought nags at Serena. She has seen the black in another place, a place where it didn't seem to belong because it is surrounded by brown—the light brown color indicative of males in both Undine…and werewolves.

Alaric.

Serena gasps, stumbling back. "You…you…you're," Serena points her finger at Isadora.

Look for the one called Alaric. I must know about him.

Heads turn toward them, and Kai and Murphy are standing beside Serena before she takes her next breath. "You're his…" she manages to stutter out again.

"His mother," Isadora finishes for her. She has finally stopped jittering, her shoulders sagging.

Kai and Serena exchange glances. "You said your child is dead," says Serena.

She shakes her head. "I said he is no longer with us."

Sinking to her knees, Serena presses her hand to her mouth. *If Alaric is Isadora's son, then that makes him my cousin.* She shakes her head.

"Your majesty?" Someone calls out and Serena feels hands lifting her back to her feet, supporting her wavering stance.

My cousin, she thinks again. *And the king's nephew. His own nephew murdered him.* A wave of anger and nausea slide through her stomach. "Isadora is Alaric's mother. Put her under guard. She must be watched at all times."

Murphy and Kai move toward Isadora, large hands grasping above her elbows.

"No," Isadora shakes her head, putting up her hands. "I mean, yes I'm his mother, but it's not like I support what he does." Desperation spills from her voice.

"Don't…don't put her in the prison," says Serena.

Kai and Murphy loosen their grips on Isadora, but don't let go completely.

"Just watch her. You are confined to your quarters, Isadora."

The guards guide Isadora out of the Great Hall, her black scales flashing one last time. Another wave of nausea washes through Serena.

"Maybe you should come to my quarters," Hailey offers, approaching Serena.

"No," says Serena. "I'm okay," she glances at Hailey.

Hailey glances to the archway in which Isadora disappeared, surrounded by guards. "I've said it before, that woman always seemed a bit…off…" Hailey trails off under Serena's gaze. "No offense, your majesty."

"None taken," Serena closes her eyes, thinking of Alaric. *My cousin.* "Apparently everyone in the family is a bit off."

Hailey clears her throat and runs her palms down scales on her midsection, but refuses to acknowledge Serena's comment.

Time to change the subject. "While we're here, why don't you fill me in on the progress of your mission."

"As a matter of fact, Zayla and I examined Cordelia yesterday." Hailey lowers her voice. "She is showing signs of going into labor prematurely."

Serena bites her lip. "How soon?"

"She is due two full moons from now. The first, as you know, is in four days. She will surely drop but there is always a possibility she will go into labor early.

Hailey's words press down on Serena and the pressure is worse than when bottoming out in The Deep. "And if that happens?" asks Serena. "The chances that the calfling will survive?" Serena is careful not to use the plural form, she doesn't want to reveal just yet that Cordelia has a difficult labor ahead of her.

Hailey hesitates before speaking. "Not very good for the calfling or the mother. It would just be too soon."

"We've been working round the clock on some medicines and such to help," says Hailey. "But if we had some wolfsbane seeds, we could try to recreate the transformation just in case. Of course, Isadora knows the recipe for the potion better than anyone else," Hailey adds, keeping her gaze solidly on the wall behind Serena's shoulder.

Serena sighs. "Well, as she is confined to her quarters, she'll have nothing but time to work on it."

The Great Hall empties of everyone but Serena and Hailey. The guards are no doubt busy working out how to add Isadora to their already

overbooked shifts.

Serena turns to leave. "Let me know if Isadora becomes uncooperative."

"Are you going to the dining hall?" asks Hailey.

Serena suspects it is more of a suggestion than anything else. She furrows her eyebrows. "No, I have a meeting."

"A meeting?"

"At the archives," says Serena, walking away.

It isn't a complete lie.

Chapter Eleven

The sky is clear, and the surface of the ocean calm. Serena can tell by how far the moon's light pierces into The Deep. She cuts through the rays, well aware that she may have missed Liam's rope by now—it is well past moonrise.

Twisting through the narrow tunnel toward the entrance to the archives, Serena tries to bury Isadora away in her thoughts. She rockets through the space where Kai stopped to kiss her. Serena swears she can still taste him on the bubbles nipping at her mouth. This time, when Serena breaks the surface at the entrance pool, she leaps so high she can place her entire palm against the cavern's ceiling. A giant splash, then she surfaces again, nose breaking the surface first.

Smiling, Serena dons her boots and robe and walks into the archives. Two of the guards stand waiting for her with Cordelia next to them. Neither Murphy or Kai are anywhere to be seen.

"Cordelia," Serena says, startled. "I didn't realize you'd be here."

"She never left, Serena." Mariam says, gesturing to the werewolf book. "She’s still reading."

"Have you eaten anything?" Serena asks Cordelia, trying not to glance at her growing midsection and estimating how much bigger it will get.

Nodding, Cordelia glances at Mariam. "She's making sure I take care of myself."

"Yeah, she's good at that," Serena says, her lips tipping up in a smile at Mariam.

"And you, your majesty?" Mariam asks. "When was the last time you ate?"

Serena shakes her head, looking up at the narrow skylight above them. "The fate of my next meeting may very well depend on the size of my waistline." Before Mariam can comment further, Serena turns to the guards. "Has Kai or Murphy been here yet?"

"No, your majesty," says one as they both come to attention. "Murphy and Kai, along with a number of other guards will be in The Dry, standing by for your meeting."

"They may be waiting awhile. I very well could have missed my ride already."

A thick rope uncoiling from above hits Serena on the shoulder.

The guards raise their eyebrows, almost in sync.

Serena sighs as the rope swings slightly back and forth in front of her. "I guess I didn't." She looks up, grabbing the rope and giving it a slight tug. "Well, if I'm not back in an hour, don't come after me."

"Serena, wait!" Cordelia steps forward.

All eyes turn to her, and for a moment, she looks sheepish. Serena can barely place her as the most popular Undine in their caste a year ago, confidant and social. "I mean to say…be careful, your majesty."

Serena nods her head, understanding Cordelia's fears. Right now, Serena is the only person that might be able to negotiate a safe birthing event for Cordelia.

"Always am," says Serena, with a quick smile at Mariam. It used to be Mariam sending words of caution before Serena went into The Dry.

"Did Murphy or Kai say where they would be out there?" Serena asks, handing over her trident.

One of the guards shakes his head, tentatively taking the royal weapon. "No, they just said they'd remain concealed."

"Let's hope so," Serena mumbles, looking up at the rope. Placing both hands directly above a thick knot level with her face, she pulls to test its sturdiness. The rope responds; it is yanked upward with Serena dangling from the end. Serena considers letting go but Cordelia, the guards, and the books are well below her within a matter of seconds.

Instead, Serena takes a deep breath, steeling herself for the narrow shaft above her. Her heart pounds so loudly she can hear it in her ears. There is no time to debate whether this is a trap or not. Her elbow bumps the mirror reflecting sunlight down into the archives, and as the opening of the rocky tunnel first scratches at Serena's shoulders, she can hear the mirror shatter on the ground below.

Sorry, Mariam.

Moonlight blossoms across Serena's face, and she releases the rope. She stops the inevitable fall by forcing her hands and feet against hard rock. Sharp divots shred their way into Serena's palms. She still slides down and a grunt escapes her lips as she pushes outward even harder. She finally comes to a stop just as her heels touch the end of the tunnel. There are at least a hundred feet between her and the next hard surface.

"Okay!" Serena yells down, already her body is shaking with exertion. The whistle of her weapon glides through the air. She leans to one side, allowing the trident to pass through. It sails through the opening and into the starry night. When she hears the three pikes strike the dirt, Serena climbs again. The chasm narrows at the top and she latches onto fist-size grips jutting out of the walls. Dirt and debris fall away as she scrambles the rest of the way up. When her next reach hits feathery-light shrubbery instead of rock hard wall, Serena heaves herself into The Dry, inhaling a breath of musky, fog-laden air.

"Nice robe."

Serena turns at the voice behind her. "Hello, Liam of Clan Werich." Pausing, the ends of her mouth turn down in a frown. "May I have my trident back?"

Part II

Liam

Chapter Twelve

Liam wakes to the smell of stale beer and blood. He lies still, enduring the scents crawling around the room several minutes before he cracks open his eyes. A small bag full of thick, crimson liquid hangs next to his bed. The tube running from the bag to his arm ushers the blood away, separating it from Liam's veins.

He sits up, cursing. Another few minutes and the bag would be full.

What would happen then? Overflowing, a reverse process, dangerous air bubbles in my blood stream…I don't know but I don't want to find out, either.

Fingertips scraping across the gritty floor, Liam's hand closes around a clamp, picking it up and using it to pinch the tube closed. The last of the blood trickles into the bag, then the tube goes clear. Swinging his booted feet off of the bed, Liam closes his eyes and grimaces as he withdraws the needle from his vein. One slow breath, and it is out.

A small spurt of red trickles down the inside of his arm. He stands, a wave of blackness threatening to overtake him. The room rolls in front of him. Dirty dishes in the sink, curtains drawn tight against his tiny trailer windows, and empty beer bottles littering the floor. Liam steadies himself against the flimsy wall. His boot hits something, and a sealed bag of blood slumps over.

As his head clears, he glances at three more small sacks of his blood.

Alaric went too far this time.

By all accounts, Liam should not be standing. But his body adjusts well to the lack of sanguine fluid.

Is it because of the wolf inside, or because I've been doing this for almost a year?

Unhooking the most recent bag from the hanger on the wall, Liam walks to the sink, tempted to dump it out. He pauses, considering it, but

Alaric would just make him endure the torture all over again. Instead, he removes the other end of the tube from the bag and seals it shut. He throws a jacket on and collects the rest of his blood donations.

The trailer door swings shut behind him as he leaves. The nights are getting colder, and his breath hangs in the air in front of him like an ominous mist. Walking past the other trailers in the park as quickly as he can, Liam ducks his head, keeping his mouth tucked into his jacket.

He tolerates Alaric because he has to. He is bound to the clan, and can't seem to go further than a few miles before feeling stretched too tight, like he might rip right through the middle if he doesn't return. Having tried leaving on several occasions, he knows the feeling all too well.

Only two more sets of a trailers to go. He'll drop the box in front of Alaric's door, then will be free to head to the bowling alley down the road. It is his only true escape from Alaric's rule. Even though Alaric's henchmen go there whenever they aren't on duty, Liam can hide away in the kitchen.

Working hard to lighten his steps and go unnoticed, Liam even holds his breath as he slinks up to the trailer. He sets the shoebox of blood bags down silently and turns his back on it. The shadows of the trees beyond reach out to him, beckoning for Liam to move faster. He lifts his head in response, practically stretching out his neck as if when even his nose touches the darkness he'll be free from the trailer park.

"Liam," growls a voice behind him.

Liam stops short, resisting the urge to hunch his shoulders. Already he can feel wiry hairs prick their way through skin at the base of his neck. Turning, Liam nods his head. "Alaric."

"Goin' somewhere?" Alaric asks.

Light from the trailer blares out from behind Alaric, and Liam has to squint to make out the features on the clan leader's face. Ever since the King's Massacre, Alaric keeps tabs on the camp and everyone in it, regulating their schedule almost like a prison.

"I can hear you grindin' your teeth," says Alaric.

"I'm goin' to work," says Liam, making a concerted effort to relax his jaw. "It's on the schedule, and I'm not on patrol tonight."

"Well if you ain't on patrol…" Alaric smirks, his teeth flashing white. "You have time to talk." He gestures to the door swinging open on the trailer.

"A few minutes," Liam mumbles as he walks past Alaric.

Alaric snarls at Liam's brush-off. Of all the members in the clan, Alaric has the least amount of control over his anger, and therefore his wolf.

Alaric picks up the shoebox of Liam's blood and throws it on the small kitchen counter. Inside, Liam's nose crinkles with the smell of old pizza boxes. The trailers are old and musty anyway, several of the clan members sleep outside when the weather is fair.

"Beer?" asks Alaric, reaching into the darkened door of his refrigerator; the light bulb has burned out.

Liam leans against the sink, crossing his arms. "Work, remember?"

"Oh, come on. All anyone does there is drink. Besides, you need to replenish." Alaric throws him a bottle.

Liam leans to the side as it grazes his cheek, catching the bottle with a solid grip.

"I go there so the clan can take half my paycheck, and so the Canadian government can take the other half."

Alaric shrugs, taking a large gulp of his own beer. "Someone has to make money for the clan; most of us are out there every night patrollin' the beaches."

"Or I don't know," Liam turns away looking out a window up at the moon. "We could not patrol the beaches."

Alaric snorts. "What? And give those split tails full run of them, just so they can make more fish head babies and abandon half of them for us to inherit? Think of how many shifts you would have to work to feed all those mouths."

Liam rubs his temples. Alaric's scenarios make no sense, but it is useless to tell him that. After spending the past five years arguing with him, Liam doesn't want to waste his time any more.

"Why did you call me in here, Alaric?" he asks.

Alaric takes another drink, staring at Liam over the cold glass bottle. "I want you to talk to the girl; I have a message for her."

"I don't think the girl wants anything to do with me—she'll never trust me again, not after what you did to their king."

"She doesn't have to trust you, Liam. Just find a way to deliver a message."

Liam considers Alaric. "What's the message?"

"The offer still stands. The girl for the beaches. I want the debt fulfilled."

Mouth dropping open, Liam stutters. "I—but…the king sacrificed his life. The debt has been repaid."

Alaric's lips curl up in a cruel smile. "Hardly."

Liam feels his eyes go wide. *This man is never gonna stop.*

"Listen," Alaric reaches in for another beer, popping the lid open against the counter. "Them sea hippies are in a bind. One of them is preggers, and they need a beach to give birth. Why they can't do it anywhere else is beyond me."

Liam grits his teeth again. He has already explained it to Alaric several times.

"Anyway," Alaric continues, "Serena is in a position to negotiate. She's taken over for daddy."

"How do you know all this?" Liam asks. As he says it, movement at the back of the trailer catches his eye.

Alaric follows his gaze. When he looks back at Liam, he is smiling. "A mermaid traitor."

Liam's nostrils flare, picking up a scent that has been there all along. The smell of the sea is unmistakable. How did he not notice? "Who is it?"

"Names ain't important. For now we can call her…chum."

Yep, I definitely need to speak to Serena.

Liam downs the rest of his beer in one large gulp and throws the bottle back at Alaric. He has to move just as Liam did to dodge the bottle.

Alaric catches it with one hand, not bothering to hide the grimace on his face.

"I'll deliver your message," says Liam, heading for the door. "Don't send any of your goons to follow. There won't be any negotiations if we scare her off at the first meeting."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Liam pauses, one hand on the door. "I'm serious, Alaric."

Holding his arms up innocently, Alaric smiles. "Hey, this is your rodeo. I'm hands off."

"Give me a few days to figure out how to do this," Liam says. "I'll let you know. Enjoy the blood."

Chapter Thirteen

Outside, Liam heads in the opposite direction of the bowling alley. He flips open his cell phone and calls work.

"Hey—tell Connor I'll be a little late tonight."

"How late?" The voice on the other end of the line sounds agitated. "Danny is shooting his mouth off again about the clan to a human."

Liam sighs. He has broken up plenty of conversations where a pack member is trying to reveal who he really is, especially after several too many drinks. Usually the humans who are listening are just as drunk as the member so nothing ever comes of it. "Just give him a couple free games of bowling. Set him up at the far end with someone else from the pack so they keep to themselves."

"Should I report it to Alaric?"

"No!" Liam runs his hand through his hair, silently chastising himself for the outburst. "I mean, I'll take care of it with Alaric." Liam used to report the incidents, but after members showed up the next day with bruises, black eyes, and broken bones, Liam keeps it to himself. It was the first small step to earning the trust of some in the pack.

Liam flips the phone closed before the voice on the other end can argue. Shoving it in his back pocket, Liam heads in the opposite direction of the bowling alley. He'll only get a few hours on his timecard tonight, but Liam doesn't want to wait and give Alaric a chance to follow him to Serena. *Better to take care of it now, when Alaric isn't expecting it*. As Liam walks, he digs in his jacket pocket for a pen and paper. He scribbles out a short note, careful about what he says.

Keeping his ears perked for other wolves in the area, Liam slows until he is sure he isn't being followed. The closer he gets to the water, the stronger the smell becomes; salt and sand, wet rocks and damp earth. It reminds him of the traitor Undine in Alaric's trailer.

The note crumples in his clammy hand, and he keeps checking to make sure his sweat isn't smearing the writing. He walks all the way to the cliffs —to the very spot where he shifted in front of Serena. He will never erase the look on Serena's face from his mind. He can still feel his fangs pushing

their way through his gums, see his own blood dripping on her shoulders and face. Watching her eyes go wide and her pupils dilate with fear only increased his urge to let the wolf loose. He remembers a blow to his gut, then flying through the air. He blacked out after that; he doesn't even recall the landing. But he woke up on the same cliffs with the rising sun and a splitting headache.

From then on, Serena had no reason to trust him. *I wouldn't trust myself either, stupid*. He shakes his head. *I lost control as easily as Alaric does.*

He pauses at the edge of the cliff, looking out over the ocean. He's been here many times since, listening for Serena's call. But after the King's Massacre, the death of their King—of her father, of *his* father—Serena disappeared into The Deep, the one place Liam cannot follow.

The pull of the ocean teases him forward, a powerful force. Now he wonders if the pull never really was the ocean—maybe it was his sister, Serena, all along.

Liam considers bottling the note and tossing it out into the waves. But there would be no guarantee Serena would end up with it. It could be intercepted by any Undine—or even the traitor.

What is the one place Serena is guaranteed to be? Finally, it comes to him. Liam turns with a smile, heading for the same place he planted the shrub over the archive sun shaft in order to lure her out all those moons ago.

* * *

After delivering the note, Liam still cannot bring himself to go straight to the bowling alley. Though it is escape enough from the trailer park, plenty of the clan will be there. Stinking of stale beer and sweaty clothes, loud and drunk members barely keep the secret of the clan under wraps.

Trudging through the forest, Liam zigzags around larger trees, brushing away the flora that snags on his clothes if he gets too close. It would be much easier to traverse the forest as a wolf, but he doesn't have the heart to change tonight. A clearing in front of him opens, giving Liam the impression of a black hole. Charred flowers lie in clumps on the ground, their bright yellow coloring forever muted by several gallons of gasoline and one match. Though the smell of ash has long since been washed away

by the rains, even the trees surrounding the patch remain burnt on one side.

No longer afraid of the former wolfsbane patch, Liam cuts straight through it. What is left of the flowers is crushed beneath his boots. He would never have come to know Serena as well as he did had she not had the protection of the small, yellow flowers. He recalls their short conversations, Serena surrounded by layer after layer of the poisonous blossoms.

Lashing out with his foot, he kicks through a pile of mush. "Damn it!" he yells to himself. *How did it all go so wrong?* He set out to unite the two species, but only managed to drive them further apart.

Hands on his hips, chest heaving in anger, Liam looks down at the wilted, blackened ground. Sprung free from his outburst, a tall yellow flower stands straight up, several bell-shaped blooms hanging from one stem. A dim glow of hope burns in Liam's chest and he takes off his plaid shirt and bends to pluck the flower from the ground. It is fully grown; the petals hiding away the secrets to the next of its generation. Liam wraps the flower gingerly and moves across the rest of the dead patch, a spring in his step.

A half an hour later he emerges from the trees and peers out at a small, wooden shack, the ocean practically lapping at its door. A thin stream of smoke rises cautiously from the chimney.

The old man is home.

Liam perks his ears. The fire is going inside but there is no subtle whine of electronics. No radio, no dishwasher, not even a space heater. The old man lives simply, but not even the clan resists modern amenities. Liam taps lightly at the door. Loose on its hinges, it rattles against the frame.

No answer.

Pulling open the screen door, Liam tries the handle of the large wooden door, the brass tinged with cold. He steps inside, closing the door behind him. Squinting his eyes, Liam scans the dark room. Only the faint glow of the fire on one side of the large living room lends light. A glint of metal to the side of the fire catches his eye.

"You know we can see in the dark, right?" Liam asks. "But even if we couldn't, that rifle is reflectin' light from the fire."

A form steps forward and the muzzle lowers.

"That you, Liam? You scared me half to death."

Judging from the shaky steps the old man takes toward his armchair, and the score of wrinkles sagging off his skin like he has been in the water far too long, death very well could be knocking at his doorstep next.

"You need to keep this place warmer, Cecil." Liam walks over to the fire, throwing another log on to stoke it.

"Can't." The old man pulls a blanket over him and coughs, spittle flying from his mouth until he is out of breath.

Liam waits until the coughing fit subsides. "You sick?"

"Don't know," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "This town ain't got any doctors worth a damn."

Snorting, Liam throws another log on the fire. "Wouldn't know."

The wolves can't risk seeing a doctor and being exposed for what they are. The only form of medical care they have is Darcy, an outsider who married into the clan. She is the only human Alaric has ever allowed, probably thanks to her nursing degree, and to the fact she has given birth to a werewolf pup. The family has three of them running around now; they are the only pups since Liam was born and deposited on Cecil's docks.

"Quit wastin' all my wood!" barks Cecil.

Liam raises an eyebrow. "You know, for a human you growl pretty well."

"I can't go out scouring for wood—my hip don't work right in this cold," Cecil says, tightening the blanket around his shoulders.

"I'll bring you some," Liam brushes his hands off on his pants.

"The less you come around here, the better. I don't want that Alaric followin' you. Don't trust him, ever since he burnt down that bane patch. Could smell it from—" Cecil cuts off at another coughing fit.

"If Alaric is comin', he'll come. Hiding out in the dark with a gun pointed at the door ain't gonna to stop him." Liam walks around the room switching on lights and turning on the only space heater the old man has. "You got any tea?"

Cecil snorts. "Tea? I ain't no old woman. Grab them beers out of the cooler."

Liam smiles, rubbing the stubble on his chin as he makes his way past worn furniture and piles of magazines to the kitchen. Turning a full circle twice in the small kitchen and not spotting the cooler, he opens the fridge. Inside it is dark and there is no cold blast of air, but a small cooler sits on one of the shelves. After retiring as a fisherman from the swamps of

Louisiana, Cecil came up to Canada to start his scuba business. The southern accent he still maintains has transferred to the wolves he raised, and is a constant reminder that the old man isn't from around here; it’s one reason why Liam enjoys his company so much.

Pushing inside the cooler, Liam digs through the ice. "Don't your customers stay with you here, like, for a whole week at a time?"

"Who do you think I'm savin' on electricity for?"

"Maybe you need to raise your rates," Liam says, popping the tops off the bottles against the kitchen counter. He hands a beer to Cecil.

"Trust me, I have. I keep it primitive and expensive. The trips below are dull, yet still they come," Cecil says and takes a swig of beer, a bit of it dribbling down his chin.

Liam shifts a pile of scuba gear and take-out trash to one side of the couch. A plume of dust and dirt puffs out as he sits. "Seems to me you might not be up for scuba divin' for too much longer."

"Ha," Cecil snorts. "Haven't been below in ages. I got a couple interns that take them—though I still create the dive plans. Someone has to make sure no one gets too close to them mermaids."

"Do the interns know?"

Cecil shakes his head. "No, been hoping one of them shows an open mind, that I might pass my role on, but so far no luck."

"Well, there haven’t been any close calls, so far as I know."

"Except your girl, there—Serena—is making it harder. Used to be I could count on the full moon to tell me to stay away from the beaches and out of the water. From what you tell me, she don't exactly play by the rules."

"No, she doesn't," Liam says, leaning back on the couch. He can't decide if he is proud of the fact, or annoyed.

"Not that I'd mind runnin' into one or anything. Them creatures kind of remind me of the bayou. But, it ain't just the divin' I have to worry about. I have connections with the town council that keeps other scuba divin' companies from doing business here and keeps the fishin' to a minimum. Those connections won't be so willin' to do favors for a nineteen-year-old intern."

For the first time, Liam can spot lines of worry on Cecil's forehead through all the wrinkles. "I have a guy—good with people and good with

politics. He’s trustworthy. Why don't you start introducin' us to those people. Maybe we can help out there."

Cecil looks at Liam for a long time, gritting his teeth. His breath whistles in and out over his dry, cracked lips. Finally, he leans back in his chair, pulling the blanket up higher under his chin.

"I've kept the secrets of these waters and these woods for so long…" He shakes his head. "It's my life's work—besides the scuba business. I don't want someone to screw it all up."

"Cecil—"

The old man holds up a hand, cutting Liam off. "I suppose if anyone is capable of keepin' your secrets, it would be one of your own."

A long silence passes, the sizzling and popping fireplace making the only sound. Cecil is smiling to himself.

"What?" Liam asks, looking into his empty beer bottle.

"It's just, I remember you—you were my last. They left you at the end of my pier. One night after the full moon as they always did. I still check, you know. Just in case."

Liam's grip grows tight around his bottle at the story of his abandonment.

Cecil continues anyway, eyes drifting up, lost in his memories. "For some reason, you seemed special to them. And no wonder, if you were the last."

"Why…did I seem special?" Liam keeps his eyes pinned to the bottle, but his fingertips move up to the crescent moon-shaped birthmark on the side of his face.

"Because," Cecil leans forward, eyes glittering with sudden life. "The king delivered you. The king! I saw him myself—my first and last full grown mermaid, uh, merman—"

"Undine," Liam mumbles.

Cecil doesn't hear. "Only one I ever saw. He had it all. The crown, the trident. Like a Greek God." Cecil leans back sighing. "He watched me, from a distance. Made sure I wrapped you up, took you inside. All night, as your tiny, fragile body endured the transformation from the potion they had already given you, I heard him out there. Oh, he was quiet alright. But the surfacing and diving back under was constant. He seemed so agitated that I expected a trident to come sailing through the window and straight at my head any moment."

"Has he been back since?" asks Liam.

"No," Cecil says, raising a knobby finger at Liam. "You were his son, weren't you?"

Liam nods slowly. "Just found that out, myself." There are a few more moments of silence while Liam works past the lump in his throat to speak. "He's dead now."

"How?" Cecil lifts his eyebrows in surprise.

"Alaric."

A low, guttural growl emits from the old man. "That low-down son-of-a-bitch! I knew he was sour from the moment I laid hands on him. He was the first I discovered. I picked him up at the end of the pier, stayed up with him all night and watched him transform. That very morning I walked to the water, makin' a promise to a calm sea that I'd watch over him—and you know what he did?"

"What?"

"He threw up on me—right after I made that promise!"

Liam's eyes go wide, and a laugh escapes his throat.

"It wasn't funny! That boy was a hellion growin' up. Havin' raised him myself, you'd have thought he'd turn out better." Cecil looks at Liam with serious eyes, then finishes off his own beer. "Ran off when he was fourteen. I'd thought I'd seen the last of him. And didn't mind so much as I had two other boys to look after by then. Five years later, he came for them, too. I woulda put up a fight, but my business had taken a turn for the worse, and well, you know…"

"Yeah." Liam says, leaning forward in his chair to set his own empty bottle on the floor.

"Should have kept you, though," Cecil murmurs, starting to drift off to sleep.

Liam stands, taking the empty bottle from Cecil. "No—it was better that Alaric raised me. Otherwise I wouldn't have the first clue on how to bring him down."

Cecil snorts. "You just be careful, you hear me son?"

"I hear you," Liam says, retrieving the two empty bottles and setting them on the counter next to a dozen others. He tries changing the subject. "Liam, Alaric, Connor—what's with all the Irish names, anyway?"

Cecil pulls a blanket over his legs, nestling his head back into a cushion. "My nana was from Ireland—straight off the boat and into the

swamps…"

The fire begins to smolder out, but Liam pushes back a pile of magazines sitting too close to it anyway. By the time he walks outside, closing the door softly behind him, the old man is snoring.

Chapter Fourteen

Clouds roll over the moon, giving it a hazy, silver glow. Liam's beast stretches beneath his skin. It hasn't been out for a while now, and needs a release. The birthmark on the side of his face burns, reminding him what Alaric told him once:

Seems you have a special affinity with the moon.

Liam will never forget those words. They are seared into his brain, the same way his birthmark sears him each time he shifts. It hadn't taken long for Alaric to discover Liam could shift at will, without the full moon and without any Undine fear induced pheromones permeating the air.

But it wasn't until Alaric began injecting Liam's blood into other wolves, that Liam had started building his own, secret army—one that would eventually take Alaric down. After just a few doses, Alaric had a dozen wolves that could change at will. It does not bode well for the clan, for the Undine, or for anybody.

Just thinking about it causes a few spiky hairs to emerge along the back of Liam’s neck. They cut through his skin like the dirty needles Alaric injects into Liam’s forearms.

The bowling alley will survive without me a little longer, Liam thinks. *I need to run.*

Just as he gives himself permission, the burning sensation fire-balls out from his scar and onto his scalp, chest, and legs; it envelopes his entire body then sinks in until even his bones combust in the inferno. Liam can barely feel his bones stretching and popping behind the searing pain blazing throughout his cells.

Lifting his chin to the moon and clawing at his own skin, Liam rides the tidal wave cresting into insurmountable agony. At the apex of the swell, when Liam swears he can reach up and touch the moon, blackness takes over.

Not but a few seconds later, the werewolf opens his eyes, and it is Liam stretching underneath the skin, cautioning the animal when necessary, and pulling back on the beast when he can.

Liam always had more control over his wolf form than others exhibited. If it weren't for Alaric playing the role of the Alpha and keeping them in line, the others would run rampant every full moon. But Liam never needed Alaric's orders to act as a governor; he simply chose to follow the pack leader.

Not wishing to jar the old man from his sleep, nor attract any undue attention, Liam chokes back the howl rising up from his chest. Instead, he runs.

Ears perked, he begins with a slow gallop. His padded feet fall like dominos on the soft earth, one right after another. His tongue lashes out. The one habit Liam can't seem to break as a wolf is the constant licking of his nose. He doesn't understand the urge to keep it wet, yet he continues to do it. It is as necessary as breathing and he swears he can taste snot for days after.

He sniffs the air, sensing a clear path ahead and picking up speed. The wind whips against him, pulling at his fur. Though his whole body is covered with it, the hair is thicker around his chest, neck, and head—like a lion's mane. The pelt around his midsection and upper legs is slicked back and lies flat against his skin.

The forest grows thick with trees and Liam darts around them, zigzagging his way toward the higher cliffs. The thick smell of brine and salt drifts past Liam's nose, as though the ocean itself has stepped into the forest. Digging his yellowed claws into the earth, he skids to a stop and turns, sniffing the air. It isn't just any Undine, it is the traitor he smelled at the back of Alaric's trailer.

Liam pulls his lips back in a snarl and his ears flatten against his skull. Strong haunches sink to the ground then shoot forward like a spring, propelling Liam toward the smell. In an instant, the prey's heartbeat quickens and it is running in the opposite direction. Fear permeates the air, overpowering the odor of brine and salt and Liam relinquishes rein to his wolf.

The beast runs faster, saliva dripping off his fangs in anticipation of a kill.

No wonder we turned against the Undine, Liam thinks inside. *After we ran off all the humans and wildlife, there was nothing else to play with.*

When he catches sight of bioluminescent hair whipping behind a tree, a new burst of energy rockets down his body. The beast closes the distance

quickly. When the Undine maiden is in full view, he squares off his shoulders. Thick muscles go tense and his almond eyes blink once. Head down, he leans back then jumps forward. Leaping through the air with claws extended in front of him, Liam stretches his neck out, mouth wide.

The maiden jumps up, latching onto a tree branch above. The beast's fangs scrape against scaled legs, just enough to get one teasing taste, then her feet are hoisted up into the tree. Before the wolf hits the ground, he tucks. Liam slams into the Earth, spraying dirt and dead leaves all around him.

Growling, the wolf flips to his feet, but Liam pulls back on his beast before he attempts to leap again. He is trying to comprehend the maiden's speech. Only she isn't speaking, Liam realizes with a grimace. She is laughing.

He stalks around the tree, his sinewy muscles still tense, waiting to pounce. The maiden moves as he does, keeping her face in the recessed shadows of the tree. Liam can't even get a good sense of what color her scales are.

"Is this how the Werewolf Liaison eluded you?" asks the maiden.

You mean the queen, Liam thinks, another snarl pulling at his lips.

The maiden takes a bold step forward. "If anything happens to me, dog, Alaric will not be pleased. I am too valuable to him right now."

Liam lunges, clawing at the bark of the tree to get higher. He roars, snapping his jaws at her feet, just inches from them.

She gasps, and crawls higher into the tree. She is on another branch by the time Liam thumps into the ground again. He regains his footing, stalking around the tree furiously as he listens to her heartbeat settle, resuming a steady beat.

"How about this," she yells down. "I know how to get to your precious Serena. Unless you leave right now, I will go straight to her and make you wish you never met me."

Liam whines out loud, though he tries to tell himself the threat is idle. He looks up at the maiden, aware he won't get at her unless he shifts back to his human form. Even then, she has the advantage higher up in the tree.

"Believe me, wolf, I can get closer to her than most."

Another scent catches Liam's attention. More werewolves, and judging from their hyped up, earthy scent with just a tinge of Liam's own blood, they are Alaric's henchmen, on patrol.

The maiden is looking in the same direction. "Better make a quick decision," she taunts.

Liam shakes his mane and comes to the base of the tree. He lifts up on his hind legs, resting his front paws on the trunk. Staring up one last time in the tree, he narrows his eyes, trying to get a good look at the maiden. He has to know who she is so he can tell Serena.

But she shrinks back into the shadows again, pulling a bow and arrow from the quiver on her back. "Leave," she tells Liam, voice hardened as she nocks her arrow.

Huffing, Liam pushes off the tree and lopes away into the bushes. He halfway expects an arrow in between his shoulder blades, if the maiden is in anyway as good as Serena with the weapon. But it doesn't come. He puts distance between himself, the maiden, and the incoming wolves, hoping they don’t catch his scent.

The run back to his clothes and his phone goes quickly, his thoughts occupied with how he may have just put Cecil in danger. If the maiden followed him to Cecil's place, she would report it to Alaric. Visits to the old cabin are forbidden. Liam shifts back into his human form—the change not nearly as painful, but almost as exhausting—and dresses.

Damn, he thinks, looking down at his clothes. *Ripped again.* He picks up his cell phone; at least he didn't crush it this time. Liam will have to grab a new set of clothes before he goes to work, but a naked man walking into the trailer park is not an uncommon site, especially now that most wolves can transform at will. First thing to do when he gets to work is set up a watch schedule to protect Cecil. *The old man ain't going to like that.*

Chapter Fifteen

"On patrol tonight?" Connor raises his nose to the air as soon as Liam walks into the bowling alley.

Scratching the back of his neck, Liam shrugs. "Just out runnin'."

"Lucky bastard," Connor says, burying his nose back into his glass of beer. He is one of the pack who refused a blood injection, which is how Liam grew first to like him, then to recruit him to his cause. "And here I sit, drinkin' away the itch that can't be scratched until the full moon."

Behind the bar, Liam fills a clean glass with tap water and slides it over to Connor. "You know how we can solve that little problem."

"No thank you," mumbles Connor, begrudgingly putting one hand around the glass of water. "Might get AIDS or something. God knows what's runnin' through your veins."

Liam chooses to ignore that half-hearted attempt at an insult. "Not so busy tonight," he nods toward the only three lanes occupied. Despite the lack of occupants, the building smells heavily of smoke and sweat.

"Nah," says Connor, swiveling his stool around, leaning one elbow against the bar. "But lane twenty is stuck again."

"Christ, that's the third time this week. It's those new sixteen pounders you ordered; they knock the whole apparatus loose back there," Liam gripes, already grabbing the tool kit and walking around the dilapidated bar.

"Hey, Liam." Connor looks at him with heavy, reddened eyes. "See lane twelve, the one standing back a bit?"

"Yeah?"

"We're thinkin' of bringing him in."

"What the hell would he do? We ain't never busy enough, except on league nights—"

"Not bringin' him to work here, idiot," Connor slurs.

"Oh." Realization dawns on Liam, and he sets the took box down with a heavy thump. "What do we know about him?" Liam can barely recall which trailer he claims at the park. "How do we know he's not loyal to Alaric and just sniffing out information on his behalf?"

"I checked into him—he's golden." Connor smiles, then falls off his stool. "I got it, I got it." He stumbles while picking himself back up.

"Yeah—you're instillin' loads of confidence…" Liam trails off, looking back at the new guy. He walks to the machine to get his ball, and as he bends over the logo on the back of his work shirt is displayed.

Doug's Pier: Docking and Rentals.

"Okay, Connor." Liam watches as he makes a strike. "He could come in handy. Let's start him with a few simple tasks."

"You're the boss." Connor raises his glass.

Laughing, Liam heads down to lane twenty. Technically, at the moment, Connor is the boss.

* * *

It has been only one night since Liam dropped the note down the hole for Serena. By sunset, Liam is walking the shores, staring out into the ocean.

Did she get the note? Even if she did, will she come?

The waves offer no clues and the briny air coming off the sea only teases him. He stares out until he convinces himself to have faith, then visits the burned wolfsbane patch, searching for more flowers. He manages to find several, and begins collecting them in a basket left behind by the Undine.

Armed with as much wolfsbane as he could find, Liam heads for the forest just as the sun sinks from the sky. He waits near the hole behind a large, fallen pine tree feeling like the wolf awaiting Little Red Riding Hood, except now the wolf has the basket.

Liam raises his nose and sniffs the air. He senses at least three separate Undine in the area; male, by the scent of them. Liam keeps to a crouch though he is under no impression they don't smell him as well.

All at once, the night air grows thick with tension, and a slim, golden trident sails out from the hole in the ground. It is followed by a small blue-scaled hand clawing out. Liam smiles. It's as if the wolfsbane has brought him luck.

He rises slowly, hands further out to the sides than necessary as he enters the clearing to show he has no weapons. Before Serena emerges fully from the hole, Liam bends to pick up her trident. There is a scuffle in

the bushes across from him and five sharp arrows emerge from the leaves, pointed at Liam.

He shakes his head, hoping his eyes aren't flashing red. He bends his knees, reaching behind him for the basket. Tilting it forward and presenting his wares to the arrows, he hopes the archers behind them get his meaning.

I mean her no harm.

The seconds stretch out. Serena's heavy breath breaches the air, adding to the tension.

Finally, the arrows move back. If Liam squints hard enough, he can still make out the tips trying to pawn themselves off as leaves.

He takes a deep breath, and watches her crawl the rest of the way out of the hole. "Nice robe."

When Serena turns, Liam's breath catches in his throat. Silver swaths of moonlight glide over dark blue scales, as if she has brought the ocean itself ashore. All Liam wants to do is find a way past those armored scales, wrap his arms around her, and give her a giant hug—making up for all those he missed out on.

Serena is saying something. Swallowing hard, Liam attempts to smile and hopes Serena buys it. "You look…taller, Serena."

Jackass. She looks so much more, but taller is the best you can come up with?

Liam twirls Serena's trident in his hand, the pointed tips gleam under the moonlight. It feels feather-light in his hands, but Liam is not fooled. He has seen the way it rips right through a ribcage. It is a sturdy weapon and reminds him of the claws that lie in wait underneath his knuckles. "I come bearing gifts." Liam pushes the basket of wolfsbane toward her.

She leans forward to look, the long black braid falling off her shoulders as she does. "I thought you burned all the patches."

He stops twirling the trident and fixes her with a hard stare. "To be clear, I didn't burn anything."

"Your people did." Her voice matches his cold tone, growing colder by the second.

"Under Alaric's orders, but not everyone in the pack agrees he’s leadin' us down the right path anymore."

"Is that why you summoned me?" Serena asks. She slowly bends to pick up the basket, eyes still darting from Liam, to her trident, and back again.

Liam shakes his head, turning the trident once again. "No, not really."

Serena looks into the basket she holds. It is filled to the brim with wolfsbane flowers, each one containing the possibility to start a new patch.

"You should know there are more of my people here, watching you," says Serena.

"You should know," says Liam, picking up the trident so the full weight of it rests in his palm, "that none of my people are here." *And thank God for that*.

He holds the trident out at arm's length toward Serena. She steps forward, extending her own arm. It is scaled down to the wrist in full armor. When she grasps the stem of the trident, just below his hand, he doesn't let go. Neither moves; neither relinquishes the trident. He raises his eyebrow at her, waiting. Finally, she begins to retract her armor. Scale by scale, the ocean disappears beneath skin, hidden away like Liam hides his wolf.

"Thank you for trustin' me," says Liam, letting go of the trident.

Serena nods, and Liam notices she does not step back. Instead, she brings the weapon parallel to her body and raises her chin to look into his eyes. "You are my brother, after all."

One side of his mouth curls up in a smile. "Born to the same people, under the same moon, yet both of us abandoned by them."

A ribbon of bioluminescent glow shoots through Serena's hair, from her crown to the tips. "Our father was facing difficult choices."

"So you've forgiven him, then?" He turns away, as if he is indifferent to her answer, but he still looks at her out of the corner of his eye.

The question causes Serena to flinch. "Have you?" she asks.

Taking a deep breath, Liam turns his back on her—pacing to the tree line, then returning. "In the pack, we are raised to hate the Undine with every hair on our body—every hair when in wolf form," Liam says, emphasizing his point.

"That is a lot of hair," mumbles Serena.

He ignores her comment. "We were abandoned at birth because we were found unworthy of the seas, cast aside like gutted fish remains. Alaric reminds us of these things at the gatherin’ durin' the full moon. For my whole life, hatred of the Undine has been shoved down my throat."

"Our male calflings were dying – parents had no choice," Serena says, trying to make him understand. “They had to force the transformation and

give their sons to the Earth, or watch them die."

Liam shakes his head. "A detail Alaric likes to leave out." He kicks at the dirt under his boots.

Serena crosses her arms. "Then how did you find out?"

"The old man, the one human link between the Undine and the werewolves," Liam looks in the direction of the cabin down the coast.

Serena follows his gaze. "I've never met him."

"No." Smiles Liam. "I suppose you wouldn't have. The Undine leave their sons with him. And he makes sure the infants get to the pack, safe and sound. I sought him out later," continues Liam. "Asked him some questions that he was more than happy to answer. Said I was the only one to ever come askin'."

"That is…kind of crazy."

"I know," Liam says, talking faster now. "So I started bringin' others to see him, but only those that were somewhat open to the possibility that Alaric might have been less than truthful with us." Liam pauses, looking at Serena. "What?"

She has a wide smile on her face. "Nothing." She tries to resume a blank expression. "It's just—you remind me of me."

Liam relaxes his shoulders and returns the smile. "Uh-oh," he says, teasing.

"So where does the pack stand now? Would they be open to an alliance with the Undine, instead of a war?"

"We are divided. Those of us that have our doubts followin' Alaric have begun to meet regularly. And the others—well, you understand we have to be careful. If word got back to Alaric, I don't know what he'd do, but it wouldn't be good."

"He doesn't realize what is happening?"

"I don't think so. He’s cocky and arrogant, and he’s been our leader for so long that no one ever questions him."

Serena shifts the trident from one hand to another. "And let's say he is completely blindsided. What’s your plan? What are the next steps?"

Liam shrugs, looking up at the stars. "I don't know. I don't know how I want this to end, or if it could ever really end well. I was raised by Alaric, you know. On clear nights we would sit outside, looking up at the stars, and he'd tell me the legends of the constellations. Many of them have to do with the seas. Aquarius, the Water Bearer; Capricorn, the Sea Goat;

Gemini, the Twins—and their unconditional help toward sailors; and Pisces, the Fish. It's like when the stars look down, all they can see is the great ocean covering all of Earth. It just makes you feel kind of, I don't know…left out." Liam gives a nervous laugh. "I don't know why I told you all that, it's just—half the pack is lookin' to me now and I don't know what to do."

"Is that why you wanted to meet?" asks Serena. "To ask me what to do?"

"No." Liam shakes his head. He takes a step back.

Serena narrows her eyes.

"I asked you here on Alaric's request."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Liam feels the pulse of her heartbeat quicken. It thunders through him, shaking his bones and pounding in his ears. Her fear triggers his wolf, and he falls to his knees, squeezing his own arms around him, trying to hold himself together. "Control yourself, Serena!"

Inside, his blood rushes to his major joints, as if it is pushed and pulled by the moon itself. Her heartbeat grows louder and faster, even more so as his shoulder blades begin shifting under his shirt. It is a self-sustaining cycle, one that each of them is almost powerless to stop.

"You're asking *me* for control?" Serena takes several steps back, holding her trident at the ready. "I can literally see your wolf emerging."

Liam expects a hail of arrows to pierce his heart any second. He tries listening for the telltale whistle cutting through the air, but he can't hear a damn thing other than Serena. Her breath rushing in and back out through her lips, the electrical buzz of her bioluminescent hair as she fights to control it, and the ever increasing drumming of her heart.

Suddenly, the familiar whistle of a trident cutting through the air catches Liam's ear. Forcing one eye open, he sees the flash of a gold spearhead sailing over Serena's head, directly for him.

In front of him, Serena thrusts her own weapon into the air and the pair of tridents collide. Pulling her tips to the ground with an expert flick of her wrists, the rogue weapon is forced down. It plunges into soft soil, spraying bits of earth across Liam's face.

"Stop!" Serena yells.

Liam just wishes she would stop. Transformation in response to elevated Undine maiden energy is much different than when Liam chooses to transform on his own. The fire isn't as great, which means he can feel

every fissure in his bone split apart then meld back together. In front of him, Liam sees Serena facing off with her own kind.

The stampeding herd of Undine guards have obeyed, stopping short before they reach Serena and Liam. Their chests heave and their eyes dart wildly from Serena to Liam and back again. They hold panes of glass in front of them.

Bulletproof? They won't stop a fully transformed werewolf, though.

Still standing in front of Liam, Serena straightens, slamming the stem of her trident into the ground. "This is my brother—my kin. You are forbidden from harming him—tonight and any time thereafter." It is the first decree she has ever made as queen, and she hopes she’s done it right.

Trying to ignore the blinding pain emanating from his joints, Liam focuses on the scaring heat on the side of his face. He channels energy toward the crescent mark, hoping to kick-start it.

Soon enough the burning takes over, enveloping his body. Both kinds of transformations collide, confusing his systems. Everything freezes, a self-preservation method. He knows he is in a state of half-transformation, and he wouldn't dare want to see himself, but at least he didn't go so far as to black out.

Breathing hard from the exertion, he takes a few shaky steps to stand by Serena's side. She tenses, but is thankfully able to keep any other adrenaline rushes at bay.

"You are…in control?" asks Serena.

"Think so," replies Liam. It hurts even to speak.

"You might as well tell me what Alaric wants," Serena says. "Quick, before you try to eat me."

The dry humor helps. His wolf calms, and he doesn't have to hold onto him quite so tight. "He wants you, Serena," says Liam. "Says the ultimatum still stands. If you give yourself to the wolves on your eighteenth birthday four days from now, he will honor your peace agreement. But if you don't, no pairin' or birth events will be allowed."

Liam looks each Undine guard in the eye as he speaks. Behind their glass shields, they won't even hold his gaze, they glance away after a few moments. Judging from the amount of heat on one side of his face, only one eye blazes red.

"Serena, you can't actually be considering this." One of the guards speak up. "Please just, come home now."

"Kai, just give me a second to talk this through," says Serena, stepping toward the Undine guard.

"He is half wolf right now," says Kai.

"I trust him, Kai." Serena says.

Several seconds pass. Finally, Kai lowers his glass shield.

From behind her, Liam can almost see the relief emanating off Serena in the way her shoulders relax.

"Thank you, Kai," she murmurs. "Here, put the flowers in your dry pouch and deliver some to Hailey and Isadora."

Serena turns back to Liam. "Please tell Alaric I will consider his request."

Liam nods, unwilling to take his eyes off the guards or their tridents.

"And Liam," Serena steps closer, lowering her voice. "Can you get your hands on a boat?"

Liam pauses, thinking about Doug at the bowling alley. He nods his head.

"Good," says Serena, turning back to her guards. "I'll come up with a plan and let you know. Thanks for not killing me tonight."

Liam snorts, wanting to thank her guards for not killing him, but his vocal chords are so twisted it still hurts to talk. Still, he needs to warn her of the traitor.

"You haven't told me," Liam says, the last word morphing into a growl.

"Told you what?" Serena asks over her shoulder.

"What it feels like to be royalty," he says.

Eyes wide, now she turns around. "How did you know?"

"Because your majesty, you have a traitor," Liam bends at the waist in a courteous bow then stumbles away from the Undine. With each step further away from them, he can feel the nerves that run hot underneath his skin settle. The wolf loses his hold over the human and before long thick, spiky hairs flutter to the ground. They leave behind soft pores in Liam's skin, ready for the next batch to emerge when he transforms.

Yellow claws dig into soft dirt, and with the very next step it is his bare feet sinking into the ground. He pauses at one of the marked trees, distinguished only by a particular smell, and digs for a cape under the foliage. Wrapping the cape around himself, he heads toward the docks mulling over the meeting in his head. It gave him two very important pieces of information. One is that Serena is willing to do anything for her

people, and the second is that her people are willing to do anything for Serena. Neither is a good combination for what Alaric has planned.

Chapter Sixteen

"Gonna go swim it off?" Liam asks, startling the man who is staring out into the water from the docks.

Connor turns, steadying himself on the shredded, swinging rope—the only thing separating one world from the next. It isn't unusual to catch a wolf standing at the edge of the ocean, staring out like they may jump in any moment. No one knows if it is the water itself enticing them, or the mermaids in it.

For the wolves though, there is something else keeping them from the water. It is the feeling of abandonment they experienced not just as babies, but every day of their lives. They are outcasts, turned away from home before ever getting to know it. They are the betrayed.

Breakers push against the dock in an enticing rhythm. The low beat of frothy waves, the high notes of the salty spray, and the enchanting melody of the hum of life teeming just below the surface combine, almost forming whispers to a siren's song promising the seductive kiss of a lover, or better—the coveted kiss of a mother.

Liam shakes his head. *This pastime is dangerous*. More than one wolf has succumbed, committing suicide on the beaches believing their loved ones would escort them to sea in the afterlife. *No wonder we all drink.* He smacks Connor hard on the back, trying to shake them both from their reverie.

"Did you talk to Doug?"

"Yeah, man," Connor blinks, the words sounding strained. He takes a deep breath, makes an effort to peel his eyes away from the midnight blue water, and turns to Liam. "He's on the fence."

"How much did you tell him? I told you before, we have to be able to trust these guys before we bring them in." Liam runs his hand through his hair, pacing away.

"Relax." Connor holds up his hands. "I mostly just asked questions, getting a feel for where he stands in the pack. He has attempted to leave more often than anyone else, you know. More than even you."

"Yeah?" Liam turns around, his interest piquing.

"Yeah. I mentioned there might be an alternative. He seems open to it, but…"

"I knew it, I just don't have clout with these guys. Why should they follow me? What reason do I have to give them?" Liam kicks at one of the splintered wood planks.

"Please tell me you didn't just say that." Connor rolls his eyes.

"What?" Liam leans against a post.

"Despite the fact that you are the youngest here, you do realize most of these guys actually look up to you, right?"

Liam runs a tired hand over the stubble growing on his chin. "No they don't."

Connor nods. "Yeah, they do. Ever since you made it a habit of second guessin' Alaric, first at his teachin' sessions, then with his command decisions."

Smiling, Liam recalls the frustrated anger emanating off Alaric whenever a pupil starts up with the questions. "It mostly started just to get a rise out of him. Had to entertain myself somehow."

"Still," says Connor. "They were listenin'." He pauses for a moment, playing with the frayed rope, only causing more strands of it to become unraveled.

"What?"

"It's just, I think some of them need a final push. The desire, and the will for change is there—but they need some guidance. And it can't be with the heavy-handed reign Alaric uses."

"I know, I know. But what?" Liam asks.

"Well," Connor shifts on his feet. "I do have somethin' in mind."

"What?" Liam narrows his eyes.

More silence.

"Come on, Connor!" Liam says, on the verge of strangling his friend with the rope just to get him to speak.

"I promised a match."

"You—you…what?"

"A match," Connor repeats.

"Me?"

Nodding, Connor looks behind him, as if he might actually consider bolting if Liam doesn't take it well.

Now Liam scratches at his stubble with furious hands. There hasn't been a match in years. It is a stupid, chauvinistic practice the pack used to use to settle differences. Alaric made sure they were scheduled almost monthly, until a silent protest was organized by Liam—though no one knew it was him. Members of the pack simply refused to attend, and without the boisterous crowd cheering on the fighters and no bets being exchanged, fighter participation dropped.

During the last scheduled fight, the combatants actually stood in the ring, discussing the problem and leaving after a handshake. Although Liam wasn't there, because of the protest and all, he could just imagine the look on Alaric's face.

Now Connor is suggesting they start up the same archaic practice Liam worked to stop, just so Liam could recruit followers.

"There has to be another way," Liam says.

"I'm open to suggestions, man."

The silence stretches out, measurable by each wave beating against the pier. Somewhere underneath, a plastic bin is caught against the pillars. Pings ring out like a ticking timer, awaiting Liam's decision.

He shakes his head. "I don't need Doug's boats. I can find another."

Briefly, Liam considers using the Cecil's scuba diving boat for Serena's plan.

No, I can't risk his involvement in this any more than I already have.

Liam sighs. "Who would I fight?"

Connor shrugs. "I could arrange for it to be pretty much anyone you want. Someone easy, maybe…"

Liam raises an eyebrow in warning. "No. If the outcome of this match is going to win me any followers, I'll have to earn it. Get someone big."

"Shawn?"

"No. He is too likeable."

"Gary?"

"Too dumb."

"Who then?"

Liam walks to the end of the pier and sits, dangling his feet over the edge. "During the King's Massacre, once everyone made it to the beach…" Liam pauses, remembering staggering out of the woods just in time to see Alaric tear into the king. "Some of the guys talk about a few wrongful deaths that took place."

"Well, yeah," snorts Connor. "They were dragging us out into the ocean to be drowned."

"Not pack deaths, mermaid deaths."

"Oh. You mean like the king? Do you want to fight Alaric because of that?"

"I can't fight Alaric yet—he has to lose clout with the pack, first. I'm talkin' about Serena's friend, Ervin. It was Rand who killed him, right?"

Connor's eyebrows lift as realization dawns. "Oh. . . yes. He had the gun."

It's not that guns were specifically forbidden during the King's Massacre, but there is a certain amount of pride in facing off with an Undine guard and dueling without weapons. Holding one down just to shoot him in the face was disgraceful to the pack. Several members had a problem with what happened on the beach that night, but what Rand did was like icing on the cake.

"Rand and his little goon squad. They all had guns. Serena was shot, too," says Liam.

"And they just so happen to be Alaric's closest followers," Connor says. "You do this, you start to break down Alaric's reign of terror."

Liam skims his foot over the surface of the water, a bit of foam sticking to the underside of his boot. "Set it up. I need a chance encounter with Rand. Somethin' that will set us both off. You can step in and suggest it settled in a match. There needs to be lots of witnesses."

"So at the bowling alley?" Connor asks.

Liam nods.

Connor’s shoulders sag. "You're going to smash something up, aren't you?"

Smiling, Liam looks up. "You've been meaning to demo the ball return on lane fifteen, right?" He hops up, slapping Connor on the back. "I'll get it done for you, boss."

Chapter Seventeen

As luck would have it, Rand shows up at the bowling alley the very next night with his crew. The last of the Ungainlies have left, but Connor keeps the alley open for pack members only— sometimes into the early hours of the morning. It's better if they cause trouble here rather than in town.

Rand and his group down three rounds of beer before even heading to the lanes. Behind the bar, Liam sends the drinks out laced with hard liquor. It doesn't take long before they are loud and out of control. The second time a ball goes crashing down the lane just as the sweep lowers to clear the pins, Connor nods to Liam.

Now is as good a time as any.

"Hey, asshole." Liam shoves a finger into Rand's shoulder. "Ask your crew to tone it down or I'll have to ask you to leave."

Rand turns around, a smile on his face. "Ask away."

Laughter rings up behind Rand. Liam furrows his eyebrows. Maybe he fed them too much liquor. They aren't in a fighting mood; it’s just the opposite.

"Okay—leave," Liam says, crossing his arms.

"Maybe after a few more beers."

"Yeah, barkeep," one of Rand's friends peels himself off the torn vinyl seats and stumbles up to Liam. He pours the rest of his beer right on the floor at Liam's feet. "Looks like I need a refill. Why don't you run back there and get us another round."

More laughter.

"I'm cuttin' you all off," Liam announces.

The entire room goes silent.

"You're cuttin' us off?" Rand asks. "We've had three."

The pair continues to stare each other down. Liam doesn't answer but can see the muscles tightening around Rand's jawline.

Rand tries again. "Go and get us another round, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" Liam interrupts. "Shoot me?"

Behind Rand, several pairs of eyes go wide. Since the King's Massacre, Rand has defended his use of a gun several times. None of those conversations ended well. His temper kicks in before his wits do.

"Listen here." Rand raises a hand to Liam's chest.

Liam uses the chance to escalate the confrontation. He pushes Rand hard in the shoulders, and the brute tumbles back into his friends.

By now a crowd has gathered, shouting support for either side.

'Lane fifteen' Connor mouths silently over the crowd at Liam.

Liam rolls his eyes to the flickering fluorescent lights. As if it isn't obvious, the ball return is practically wrapped in yellow caution tape and has a large out-of-order sign—been that way for two years now.

Pushed back to his feet by the crowd, Rand's face is red with embarrassment, or anger—or both. He charges, feet stomping against wood-paneled flooring.

Liam hunches, his senses sharpening with the adrenaline running through his veins. Focusing in on the man lumbering toward him, Liam smells wolf hair emerge. He glances down at Rand's hands to see nails scrape against skin as Rand’s claws grow long. Rand is an obvious recipient of Liam's own blood, and is transforming here and now, against a member of his own pack.

Time to put him down.

As Rand crashes into him, Liam wraps his arm around his opponent's waist. Using the momentum Rand already has, Liam follows it, swinging around and lifting the beast up into the air. He releases, but Rand continues to glide up. His jeans rip at the knees as bones break apart then meld back together, wider and longer. At the apex of the lift, Rand throws his head back howling, his snout already lengthening.

Rand drifts back down. Rearing back his fist, Liam feels the fire inside that wants to force his own transformation. Instead, he channels the energy down, twisting his hips as he thrusts his tight knuckles forward. The connection is a powerful hit. Rand flies back, straight into the ball return. The machine shatters underneath him.

Liam's vision has gone red, but once the color drains away, he focuses on the wolf barely moving amidst splintered wood, metal, and plastic. A cracked number sixteen lies aside the pile. Blinking, Liam looks beyond it to see the number fifteen ball return whole and untouched, a piece of the yellow caution tape waving, as if it is taunting him.

I missed.

Liam glances over the shouting onlookers to see Connor slap his forehead.

Oops.

"Enough!" Connor pushes his way through the group. He is fuming, and it is not an act. "You two are destroying my alley! You need to finish this the right way—in a match, and out of my alley."

Cheers ring up around Connor, the enthusiasm of the crowd for a match taking Liam by surprise. The sport was apparently missed.

"Fine." Liam bends over Rand. "Tomorrow night at dark."

Rand, completely transformed now, stirs, then growls up at Liam.

Wrapping a large hand around the muzzle, Liam squeezes it shut. "And no wolves allowed."

More cheers. They will fight against one another as men. Liam knows that trying to keep the wolf under control when adrenaline runs high is a huge distraction, especially when his own blood runs through both their veins. Finally, Liam can use that to his advantage.

* * *

As soon as Liam enters his trailer, chest still heaving from the fight and the run home after, he smells an intruder. "What are you doing here?"

From the corner where his armchair stands shrouded in shadows, four empty blood bags fly at Liam.

"I have more orders to fill," Alaric's says, his voice following the bags.

Liam leaves them where they flop at his feet. "Can't," he says, turning away, peeling off his jacket, and retrieving a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Can't…or won't?" asks Alaric.

Shrugging, Liam downs the rest of the bottle, making Alaric wait for his answer. He swallows and wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Cannot, will not, call it what you want. I've got a fight tomorrow. Besides, I can't give more blood so soon after—"

"A fight?" Alaric leans forward in the armchair so a swath of moonlight falls across his face. "You mean a match. Who with?"

Throwing the empty bottle in the trash, Liam buries his head in one of the cupboards moving aside empty cereal boxes, searching for food, and giving himself time to think.

"It's not Rand, is it?" Alaric asks.

Liam's chest deflates. "I made the challenge not ten minutes ago."

Alaric smiles. "Well Rand made a call five minutes ago."

Liam shakes his head. "Won't do him any good. No wolves allowed."

"Ah, so you're goin' bare knuckle with this one…"

"That's right. And no bettin', Alaric. I want to keep the match clean."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Alaric stands from the chair. "I mean, you're obviously set out to make a point."

Liam glances at him under thick eyebrows as he unwraps a granola bar. "Somethin' like that," he mumbles.

"I mean the guy has gotten a little out of hand lately. That new crew he has, runnin' around causin' trouble." Alaric paces the kitchenette, inching closer and closer to Liam.

All Liam can smell is trouble. Rand is Alaric's right hand man, there is no way he is selling him out.

"And their, let's say, prolific use of guns lately…"

Rumors floating around camp say that Alaric himself gave Rand and his buddies firearms during the King's Massacre.

Alaric nods. "Yes, I think this could work out well. Make an example out of him, but at the same time we'll put you in the spotlight."

Heat crawls up Liam's neck. He undoes the top button on his shirt, then rolls up his sleeves. He needs to distract himself with something before he hits Alaric. He turns to the dishes in the sink, crusted over with dried enchilada sauce and takeout Chinese, and flips on the faucet.

Alaric is still talking. "Hell, if you beat him easy enough, my blood orders will double."

As Liam scrubs at dishes, he looks down at the many scars on the inside of his arms from clumsy needles piercing his skin. *I look like a damn drug addict.*

"Everybody is going to want a taste of you, and soon I'll have the whole pack hopped up and able to transform at my command," says Alaric.

The plate Liam holds in his hands snaps in half. He throws it down in the sink, flips off the water and turns.

"What are you plannin' Alaric?" The wet sponge still hangs in Liam's hand.

Alaric raises his eyebrows. "I’m plannin' our species survival. We will grow stronger so we can continue the line."

Squeezing his fists, a stream of water rushes out of the sponge, slopping across the floor.

"Our species was never meant to be!" Liam yells, stepping toward Alaric. "We are the result of a desperate attempt from some fish people to keep their weak sons from dyin'. Why should we continue to thrive? What right do we have in this world?"

Alaric's lids lower. "Have you no pride? Have you forgotten everything I've taught you?" He sneers. "We aren't some wayward experiment—we have evolved from the sea, just like man did in the beginning. Except we are better than man, and we are better than our mothers and fathers who abandoned us."

Liam gives a short laugh, then turns around to throw the sponge back in the sink. "Dylan, Quinn, and Shane, plus at least half a dozen others—all dead because you have mommy issues. But you got your king—shredded him to bits. Yet it still isn't enough. You want more."

"We can't leave while these damn bottom feeders are left behind. I've tried, you've tried—we've all tried." Alaric turns banging his fist against the wall in a half-hearted attempt. "Can't get no further than town, most of the time." He looks over his shoulder at Liam. "Win this fight. Show everyone else what courses through your veins. Make them want it. If we can't leave these beaches, we will dominate them. And I need your blood to do that."

Without another word, Alaric kicks the empty blood bags toward Liam, and exits the trailer.

Leaning over on the counter, Liam buries his face in his hands. Now, if he is going to pull the clan out from under Alaric's boot, he can't let this fight happen.

Chapter Eighteen

Liam’s multiple calls to Connor's cell and the bowling alley only result in voicemail—he knows Connor is fully immersed in putting the fight together and making sure almost everyone in the clan will be there with their wallets out, no matter how much Liam shouts 'no betting'.

The first light brings knocking at Liam's trailer door. It is a group of three, anxious to coach Liam in Rand's weaknesses. No need to guess which combatant they put their money on. It is noon by the time Liam can fend off all the well-wishers, bribers, coaches, and one prostitute from town that Liam is almost sure Rand ordered. He sent her on her way with gas money for the trip out. Guessing there will probably be a few more, Liam grabs his jacket and heads out.

Though the bowling alley isn't usually open for another two hours, Liam finds the parking lot full, the doors unlocked, and the place packed. There aren't any pins being knocked down. There is a large group around the bar pre-gaming the fight, and another large group in the arcade area, where Connor has set up a betting board. From behind everyone else, Liam scans the numbers on the board. Literally thousands of dollars stand to trade hands tonight.

Liam catches Connor's eye and jerks his head toward the kitchen. Handing off the dry erase marker to someone else who begins taking bets, Connor pushes his way through the crowd. The pair enters the back kitchen, where a cook is standing over the deep fryer.

"Out," Liam tells the cook.

After the door swings shut, Liam doesn't waste any time. "I came to tell you the fight is cancelled."

"Cancelled? Why?" Connor asks, unconcerned. He picks up an industrial-sized salt shaker and salts a batch of cooling fries.

"Because Alaric wants me to win."

Spoken out loud, the reason sounds stupid and childish. But of all people, Connor knows it is best to avoid anything Alaric wants.

He turns to Liam. "If I go out there and cancel the fight, do you know what will happen?"

"More fry orders?"

"Quit jokin' around, Liam," Connor slams the salt back down on the counter. "I've collected a lot of money. There'll be a riot of people going after what they've put in. There'll also be a lot of disappointed, and possibly angry werewolves. Cancellin' the fight now isn't going to put any numbers behind you—in fact, it'll probably lose you some."

Liam runs an agitated hand through his hair. "Where's all this money comin' from anyway? If the clan is so rich, why am I givin' away half my paycheck so I can live in a trailer park?"

Connor shrugs. "I'm not sure it is all come by legal means, and it definitely isn't all reported to Alaric."

Liam paces the kitchen. When the deep fryer beeps, he grabs a towel to wrap around the handle and pulls the basket of fries out. Hot oil splatters on his hand. "Dammit!"

Three long steps and he is at the sink, thrusting his hand under cold water. Connor comes up behind him, handing him a dry towel.

"It's too late to cancel, isn't it?" Liam sighs, taking the towel.

Connor gives a half-smile and nods slowly. "Why does Alaric want to you to win?"

"He thinks it'll convince the rest of the clan to take my blood," Liam mumbles.

"Wow…just wow."

"It can't go his way, Connor," Liam says, looking over his hand. It is bright red, but not seriously burned.

Connor rests a hand on Liam's shoulder. "We'll figure something out. Have a little faith."

* * *

The rest of the evening, Connor is too busy to consult with Liam any further. Not willing to face the crowd, go home, or even to run the forest for fear of coming across any more members of the pack, Liam stays in the kitchen helping to fill all the food orders.

The cook is a young teenager from town who doesn't ask any questions. He keeps his head down, his hands busy, and his ear buds in, which gives Liam some much needed privacy to sort out how to handle the fight tonight.

The evening passes quickly, and after the last orders come in, Liam and the cook run down the line of fryers. Flipping them off, Liam turns to the teenager and shakes his hand.

"Thank you."

The teenager gives him a confused look. "No problem, man. Um… anytime?"

"Sure thing, pal," Liam says over his shoulder, leaving the back way. The fight is supposed to begin in ten minutes, and Liam has finally worked out a solution. Everything will turn out all right, as long as Alaric doesn't get in the way.

The walk to the warehouse goes quickly. When Liam enters, he is encased in the crowd at once. Pack members give him last minute advice or simply a slap on the back. Liam makes his way through the crowd muttering his thanks. Cracked concrete gives way to a dirt floor, and there is a distinct odor of rusty nails.

"You got this?" Connor pulls Liam from the last of the crowd.

"Yeah." Liam rolls out his shoulders and removes his shirt. "Is Alaric here?"

"In the back. Staying kind of quiet."

"Just make sure he stays—and can see."

"Okay…"

"I'm serious. This'll only work with him here. Have you seen Darcy yet? We might need her."

"Not yet." Connor shakes his head. "You gonna let me in on the plan?"

Liam glances around, leaning in closer to Connor. But as soon as he opens his mouth, the loudspeaker blares with an electronic whine.

"Testing, testing—" The speaker cuts off with a bout of coughing after the announcer inhales a year's worth of dust off of the microphone.

With no time for explanations, Liam gives Connor an apologetic smile. Still stretching, he enters the makeshift ring which consists of old tires fashioned into a large circle. Half the fun of the fights is watching the contestants bounce off the ring after a hard hit.

"Okay fighters." Connor enters the ring along with Liam. "The rules tonight—no weapons, no wolves. Stay in the ring."

Liam lifts his eyebrow. Connor is to be the ref. Hopefully he doesn't stop the fight too soon.

"If you stay down for a count of ten, it's a loss. If you submit, it's a loss. I will accept a tap-out or audible statement as a submission. Got it?"

Rand nods, but Liam is too busy staring at the inside arms of his opponent. Fresh blood trickles down at least four pinprick holes. He's been given blood, a lot of it—and fairly recently.

"Liam? Got it?" Connor says louder.

Eyes blazing, Liam looks up at his opponent. Rand shakes his head violently as if he had a sudden caffeine rush to the brain.

"Hey," Connor shoves Liam in the arm.

"What?"

"You okay? You got the rules?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got them. Let's get this over with." Liam's entire strategy is thrown for a loop, but there is no time to come up with plan B.

"Fighters shake hands!" Connor yells out from the middle of the ring.

Liam holds his knuckles out, keeping his eyes on the ground. His best bet is to give Rand as much confidence as he can.

Rand knocks Liam's fist away, unwilling to endure a cordial exchange.

That confidence thing ain't going to be a problem.

A bell rings, and the crowd roars, shouting suggestions, encouragement, or obscenities at the fighters.

The noise is a distraction to Liam's hypersensitive ears. Tumultuous waves of sound roll around the arena, amplified by bare warehouse walls. Among them, Liam picks out one phrase.

“Watch out!”

Instinctively he leans his head back, narrowly missing Rand's swing. Liam doesn't expect his opponent to attack so quickly. But Rand is anxious to expend the pent up energy Liam's own blood gives him.

Wiping his face with the back of his hand, Liam focuses on Rand. He can't afford to make this look too easy. Rand attacks again—three lightning-quick strikes with closed fists.

Dodge, block, dodge. Liam fends off the assault then follows with a kick to Rand's midsection. The werewolf stutter-steps back, and Liam sucks in the air.

Time to take a hit.

His best bet is to make it look like he is getting cocky.

Something fancy.

Liam charges, landing a blow to Rand's chest—nothing too damaging. He spins, ducking under one of Rand's counter-swings. But Liam rolls right into the follow-up of Rand's other fist. He can see it coming out of the corner of his eye. *It is too low,* Liam thinks. He squats down further, absorbing the strike with the side of his face.

Hands out, and body twisting in mid-air, Liam catches himself on the ground. The bitter-tangy taste of dirt and blood fill his mouth. Spitting it out, Liam listens for footsteps behind him. Rand doesn't take advantage of the fall.

Idiot.

A sharp pin-prick sensation hits the butt of Liam's palm. Lifting his hand, he wipes at the dirt. It is a tooth. Liam runs his tongue over both rows of teeth; none are missing.

Getting his feet under him, Liam stands, making sure to step over the tooth from some long forgotten fight and grinding it into the ground with his boot. He wipes away the remaining blood trickling out of his mouth, and arches his eyebrow at Rand. "Had enough?" he asks.

Blinded by rage and adrenaline, anything Liam could have said would be taken as an insult. Liam can almost see the blood vessels in Rand's eyes expanding to a bursting point with another rush of blood consuming his veins.

Rand charges, and Liam shakes his head, feigning ill effects from the previous hit. Forcing his eyes to go wide, he angles his body to give Rand as much to work with as he can. Ducking his head, Rand shoulders Liam right below the sternum, and they both fly back into the tire ring.

The fall does nothing for the fight. They bounce right back up, still locked together. Wrangling shoulders and hips, Liam twists them both in the air so they land on the dirt, with himself on the bottom.

"Ten, nine, eight…" Connor shouts out from next to them.

With his chest struggling to expand under Rand's heavy weight, Liam sucks in a breath, emphasizing the wheezing noise through his cracked lips.

On top, Rand looks more stunned than ever, just now comprehending his advantage.

"Come on, hit him, man," Connor hisses in a lower voice to Rand. Then to the rest of the crowd, "seven, six…"

"Right," Rand responds, always a pro at taking orders. He closes his fists and punches Liam in the face. Three thumps for every number Connor spews out.

Liam keeps his hands uselessly out to the side, counting down how many more hits he'll have to endure. *Connor is going slow on purpose*, Liam thinks with a grimace. *I'll get him back for that.*

Heads move higher, popping in from all directions in Liam's peripheral vision. Behind them all, he spots Alaric, still watching. If his lips weren't so swollen, Liam would smile. He could practically hear Alaric's growl of displeasure.

The blows raining down on Liam's face altogether cease, replaced by a howl of anguish. With one eye swollen shut, Liam struggles to focus the other one on the fighter above him. Suddenly, the weight on Liam's chest is lifted as Rand falls to the side. He is convulsing, his entire body jerking. The howl tapers off and is replaced by gurgling coming up from his throat.

Connor holds up one hand, pausing the fight while he bends to Rand's side. Liam pulls himself to his knees, crawling to Rand's other side.

"Rand? Oh, shit." His eyes move from the recent injection sites to the eyes rolling to the back of Rand’s head.

He glances at Connor over the convulsing body. "He took too much blood. His body is rejecting it."

Connor turns, yelling for Darcy. A shadow falls over the trio and Liam breathes a sigh of relief that help has come. The arena has gone silent. Darcy's soft but stern voice, issuing the life-saving instructions needed right now does not come. Instead, there is a gunshot blast—a short, piercing shriek that leaves Liam's ears ringing.

Rand's body goes still, a gaping hole tearing down the middle of his forehead.

Liam looks up in shock, right at Alaric. The pistol is still pointed in between Liam and Connor.

Liam was dead wrong. Alaric was hedging all his bets on Rand to win. Before the fight, he would've spread word that Rand was hopped up on Liam's blood. But the extra insurance he played by giving Rand a stronger dose was his downfall. Rand's body couldn't handle it. Instead of seeing his experiment fail, Alaric put an end to it.

"Let this be justice for disobeying my orders to bring pistols to battle." There is no round of applause or cheers, which is the usual response Alaric

receives when preaching to his people. Alaric looks down at Liam, lowering his gun. "I couldn't let him win the fight. Besides, this way the punishment fits the crime."

Alaric tries to justify his actions, but it is too late. Everyone saw Rand's seizure. Without another word, Alaric turns and leaves the arena. Liam's hand squeezes Rand's lifeless shoulder, and catches Connor's glance.

They both know that Alaric has just lost a majority of his followers.

Chapter Nineteen

Liam stalks home, leaving the shocked onlookers to handle Rand's remains. Burned and returned to sea as soon as possible is how the tradition goes. For all of Alaric's preaching about shunning those who abandoned them, they always end up in the place from which they came.

Passing one of the double-wide trailers, the almost foreign sound of a female voice rings through the camp.

Darcy.

If she had been there, treating the seizure as soon as it happened, Alaric wouldn't dare push her out of the way just to shoot Rand. Liam growls, then turns toward the trailer, slamming open the door. "Where the hell—"

The scene in front of Liam stops him short. A battered and bloodied man lays across the kitchen table. Darcy bends over him, stitching a large gash in his shoulder, occasionally dabbing at blood with clean guaze.

"Zeke?" asks Liam, piecing together the swollen face.

"Mmph," Zeke mumbles.

"You look as bad as I feel," Liam walks in, shutting the door closed behind him with extra care as guilt settles in from his explosive entrance.

Zeke grunts. "Can't believe I missed the fight. Had a hundred bucks on you. Tell me you won, man." He strains his neck to the side to look at Liam. "You didn't win, did you?"

"Well." Liam rubs the back of his neck. "I look a hell of a lot better than the other guy."

"Am I gonna have another patient tonight?" Darcy asks, snipping the thick, blue string protruding from Zeke's shoulder. She ties it off, waiting for Liam to answer. The kids are looking over her shoulder. As the pack's only medical provider, they are used to bloody men strewn about their kitchen.

"No," Liam finally says. "Not unless someone burns themselves building the fire."

Everyone pauses, even the three kids glancing up at Liam with understanding in their eyes.

"Boys, go get ready for bed. It's way past your bedtime." Darcy points to the back of the trailer with a pair of bloodied clamps.

"But mom," the oldest pipes up. "You said we could stay up and watch."

"I'm done stitching, so go," she barks.

All three kids jump then slowly make their way to their rooms.

Once they are out of earshot, Darcy turns to Liam. "You killed him?"

The look in her eyes is not anger, it is pure disbelief.

"No, Alaric did."

"What?" Zeke sits up, grabbing his side and wincing in pain.

"Careful—those ribs aren't broken, but you have a lot of bruising there." Darcy dotes on her patient, but turns her gaze on Liam for an explanation soon enough.

Colin, Darcy's husband, comes in from the living room. "He interfered? That's like…breaking his most sacred rule in the matches."

"He's getting worse," says Liam. He nods to Zeke. "What happened to you?"

Zeke shrugs, then winces again. "Got jumped walking home from town."

"Wolves?" asks Liam.

"Nah, smelled like humans," Zeke says.

"I wonder if it was Alaric's doing, just to keep Darcy occupied and away from the fights," Liam says.

Just then, Robbie, the youngest of the three boys runs out to get a toy he left behind on the couch. As he runs back through with a fake sword, he takes a swipe at Liam. Playfully, Liam dodges, spins and taps the boy in the back with his boot, shoving him along. "Get outta here…"

A giggle follows the boy to the back of the trailer. Darcy and Colin smile at Liam before their lips turn down in worried frowns as they watch their youngest disappear back into his bedroom.

Colin shakes his head. "If you hadn't stepped in to keep our boys away from Alaric's *schooling*," he says the word while making air quotes with his fingers, "who knows what would be happening to our boys right now." He glances in between the swollen faces of the men who both suffered a beating tonight.

The three boys are an anomaly. Of a clan with almost fifty members, they are the only pups born naturally, not having suffered the transformation from fins to fur. And Darcy is the only human ever to give

birth to a werewolf. Liam has managed to stave Alaric off so far, but it won't last.

"So what happens next?" asks Zeke. He gingerly touches a line of stitches across his cheek until Darcy slaps his hand away.

Liam shrugs. "First, we take care of our fallen. Then, I don't know…"

"We could try leavin' again," Colin offers. "Get you all out of here."

"No." Darcy shakes her head. "I don't want to put our boys through that again."

Liam has tried helping smuggle the family out of town twice. Each time, just as Liam and Colin begin to feel the pull to return, it seems the three boys feel it tenfold. A mother can only watch her children writhing in agony on the ground for so long. The attempt at dosing the boys unconscious until the bond was snapped didn't help either.

"Hell." Zeke slams his fist on the table that still supports his weight. "Why don't you just kill him and get it over with?"

"Kill Alaric?" asks Liam.

Zeke nods. "You know a wolf's intuition—we'll follow the alpha. The alpha just has to prove…you know, his alpha-ness, or whatever."

Liam shakes his head. "I have to be sure the rest of the pack is willin' to fall in line first. Otherwise, it would just create more fightin' while others try for the position."

"How will we know when—?" Darcy's question is cut off by a loud knock at the door.

Everyone in the room freezes, glancing at each other.

"Alaric?" Zeke tightens his fists. "He wouldn't dare show his face here."

Liam holds up his hand, letting the others know to stand down. He cracks open the door cautiously, then pulls open the door all the way. There are at least a dozen pack members standing outside.

From the front of the group, Doug steps forward. "What Alaric did tonight…" Doug trails off, shaking his head. "Well, we just wanted to let you know—whatever you need, we have your back."

The group takes a few cautious steps back, making room for Liam as he exits the trailer and comes down the steps. "You are all willin' to follow me, even if it means violatin' Alaric's orders?"

There is a chorus of grunts and nodding heads. Liam takes his time, looking them each in the eye.

"There are others, too," Doug says. "No one is happy with what happened tonight. But I'm not sure you have the support of the entire pack."

"How many?" asks Liam.

"Maybe about half. But with the roll Alaric's been on lately, it won't take much to turn the rest."

Liam nods. "Thank you. Keep this to yourselves for now. Even if you think you can trust the other wolves, we can't let Alaric catch wind of any gossip. His response will be rash and ruthless. Hang close to your trailers, and I'll send word of the next steps."

The group filters away, glancing at each other as they do. Liam feels it inside, they are unsure if they've made the right decision.

"Oh." Doug turns back around, tossing a set of keys to Liam. "Here."

"What's this?" Liam asks, catching the set in the air.

"For the office at the launch, and the lock box that holds the keys to each of the boats. Everything there is at your disposal."

Eyes wide, Liam nods his head in thanks. *Time to go get Serena.*

Chapter Twenty

The small boat skims over the surface of the ocean. There is nothing but inky black above and below Liam. The milky glow of the nearly full moon doesn't give enough light. It's as if the darkness is working to swallow the moon whole.

Liam peels his eyes from the compass on the boat's dashboard to study the moon. Only two more nights until Serena's birthday. Two nights until the deadline, and Alaric's ultimatum given to the king almost eighteen years ago. Once Serena is given to the wolves, Alaric will allow them to take back the beaches in peace. The king thought his own sacrifice would satisfy the debt, but he was wrong. And the mermaids would be wrong thinking Serena's sacrifice will be the last. Alaric will never be content—not as long as there are Undine left in the ocean.

Slightly off course now, Liam adjusts the steering wheel.

Come on Serena, where are you?

He has no doubt she can find him if she is listening, or that he could find her if she sends out a call. But what if something happened? Or what if she decided not to come?

He slows the boat and tries peering into the darkness, but the rolling ocean plays tricks on his eyes. His vision is no good out here. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he turns, heart racing. It is just an extra large wave. The boat rocks from side to side as it rolls underneath him. It would be only too easy for one of those mermaid guards to sneak up on him, or to leap from a wave and take aim with their trident or a bow and arrow.

Liam hunches his head down, as if that will help.

There is a rush of displaced water, unnatural to the movement of the ocean. Liam cocks his head. The barely discernable whine is running up from the ocean depths.

Liam turns, eyes scanning the surface. He feels so helpless out here.

Keep it under control.

Spiky hairs bristle under his skin, aching to be released. The whine gets louder as it nears the boat. The scar on his face burns, and his joints throb,

anticipating the transformation.

Behind the boat, water explodes up and out, spraying in all directions. A form shoots up into the sky just as a growl emits from Liam's throat. But he has spotted the midnight blue scales, and by the time Serena tucks her body for a roll, he has managed to swallow down his animal instincts.

Liam turns back to the wheel, ready to rev the engine when she lands. He hears a dull but solid thud behind him.

"Show off," Liam says, smiling over his shoulder. He eases the throttle forward.

Serena takes a step back for balance. "You came alone?" she asks, glancing around the boat, casting suspicious glances at the storage bins.

"I said I would, didn't I?" he answers. *Though she didn't say as much.* There is no way to tell what follows them under the surface.

"Clothes." Liam nods toward a black duffel bag sitting on the floor next to him.

Cautiously, Serena edges closer to him. She is covered from head to toe in armor. Midnight blue scales glitter under the light emerging from behind dark clouds, as if it were a shadow of the moon itself, cast upon the ocean dark. The sharp, angular lines of her face aren't necessarily imposing, though they give her an air of mischievousness. She is thinner than most humans Liam has seen, but the definition of muscle in her spindly arms and long legs says she has some fight to her.

Serena bends to unzip the bag. A braid of pitch-black hair falls over her shoulders. Standing over her, Liam can see the bioluminescent glow of each strand near her skull as if it is anxious to run the length of her hair. Somehow, she keeps it under control, just as he fights to keep his wolf fleece from emerging.

When she stands, she is holding a light blue t-shirt and a pair of small sweatpants. Pinching them in between two fingers, she brings them closer and sniffs.

Liam holds back laughter, which turns into a snort. She looks truly appalled that she is about to don the outfit.

She glares at him. "I feel like you should turn around."

"Done." He is afraid he really will laugh out loud watching her try to struggle into the clothing. "So will this be a first—a mermaid wearin' human clothing?"

"So far as I know," she mumbles.

Liam hears her hopping around the boat, then stumbling.

"No wonder we call them Ungainlies—though unsightlies might be a better description," she says behind him.

Liam looks over his shoulder, and raises an eyebrow. He eases back on the throttle until the boat is only coasting.

"What?" she asks when he turns, crossing his arms.

"Unsightly is right," he remarks. She is holding out her arms as if large, inflated balloons are shoved up into her armpits. Her feet are more than shoulder-width apart, she pulls her stomach in, and her neck long. She is trying to abstain from touching as much of the material as she can.

"What?" she says. "It's itchy."

"It's just cotton," Liam shrugs.

"Why did you stop?"

"We have some work to do, especially if you are gonna pass off as a human. You are bein' way too obvious; lower your arms."

Serena obeys, but just by a little.

"Lower," he says.

A look of disdain crosses her face, and she drops them a little further.

He fixes Serena with his best stare. "All the way."

She takes a deep breath, and lets her hands drop to her sides. "There," she says, her eyes closed tight.

"Good. Now unclench your fists, open your eyes, and relax your face. Try not to look like you are holdin' your breath."

"That's what it feels like," Serena argues.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

"Promise me you will keep clothes on at all times, no matter how itchy they are. We can't hide you from the werewolves or the humans if you are showing off your scales or bare skin."

Serena rolls her shoulders in one, large circle, closes her eyes again, then stretches her neck. It looks as though she is giving herself a silent pep talk, coaxing herself through the process.

When she opens her eyes, the bioluminescence at her roots has winked out. Her spine is no longer as rigid as a trident—it is curved, like she is slightly slumping. Her shoulders are relaxed and even the sharp, angular features of her face seem somehow softer. She has successfully transformed into a passable human.

"Yes," says Liam. "Like that!"

"As you say," Serena nods.

His smile turns into a frown. "You have to stop sayin' stuff so…so… rigid."

For a split second, her spine stiffens, but she corrects herself and tries again. "Whatever."

"And now you sound like a proper teenager," Liam says.

"Thank you." Serena cocks her head. "I think. Now, shall we continue, or do you prefer to drift among the waves the rest of the night?"

Liam furrows his eyebrows. "No, I really don't. I have someone I need you to meet anyway."

"But I need to see—"

Liam opens up the throttle and guns the boat forward, effectively cutting off Serena and leaving the ocean behind as fast as the little boat will allow.

Serena settles herself in a cushioned bench at the bow, eyes peering into the water as if she can see beyond the mirrored surface. Reaching out, Serena stops herself just before her fingertips dip into the ocean. Instead, she takes a deep breath, steeling herself, and looks toward the fast-approaching shoreline. Sequoias and pines slice through the air, like a beacon guiding Liam home.

Her eyes don't linger long at sprawling Vancouver Island. Instead they float up, fixed on the waxing moon. It has broken through the cloudy sky with an intense glow. Liam's birthmark tingles under the midnight rays. He looks at Serena basking her own face in the moonlight and he wonders if her skin tingles under the rays too.

Within minutes, the boat is puttering into the docks. He doesn't have much practice with watercraft, and it takes a few tries to angle the starboard side into the pier. Flicking off the motor, Liam walks the length of the small boat, throwing ropes up on the wooden walkway.

Stumbling a bit as he does it, Serena laughs as she crosses the boat steps out onto the pier. "Where are your sea legs, Liam?" Serena jokes.

He doesn't take it as such. "Disappeared, when my parents abandoned me."

Serena pauses on the dock, shoulders hunched. Finally, she turns. "Apologies, I should not have said that."

Shrugging, Liam steps out of the boat to tie off the ropes. "It's okay. But now you are soundin' all mermaid-y again."

"What? Teenagers don’t apologize?"

He smiles. "Not much. The better response would have been something like…'bitter much'?"

"I'll keep that mind." Her eyes scan the small hut sitting at the beginning of the dock, where the ocean ends and the land begins. "What is this place?"

Liam takes a deep breath, hoping this is going to go over well. "I like to think of it is as my second birthplace." He gestures, and the pair walk forward, side by side, down the pier.

Chapter Twenty-One

By the time Liam and Serena step inside the small hut, the sun is peeking over the treetops. Liam walks in with her close behind. The loud snoring lets Liam know they won't risk facing off with Cecil's rifle.

"He's the one?" Serena asks. "He looked after our sons when we gave them to the Earth?" She walks around the armchair in which Cecil sleeps, then bends to look closer at his face. "He received you?"

Cecil snorts and Serena flinches.

He shrugs, turning his attention to the fire. It is smoldering out. *Cecil must've gone through a good share of wood last night*. Liam smiles. *I'll have to get him more.*

"Why is he so wrinkly?" Serena asks. "Like Ungainly toes that have been underwater too long."

When Liam turns, Serena is extending one finger to the lines on Cecil's cheek. "Serena…don't!"

Cecil jolts forward, eyes flinging open, and jostling the rifle off his lap as he gasps. The gun lands on Serena's toe, the one Liam remembers being injured during the King's Massacre.

"Ow!" She lashes out, slapping Cecil across the face.

All Liam can do is bury his forehead in his hands.

"What in the Sam Hell?" Cecil starts, coughing after each word. He glances at Liam. "Who is this?"

"It's…Serena." Liam lowers his hand in defeat, all hopes of an amenable friendship gone out the gunshot hole.

Cecil glares at the mermaid in front of him. "Serena who?" But his gaze lingers on her face and her hair. He pushes himself to standing so he stares directly at her, his eyes opening in wonder, then slanting into acknowledgement. "She's one of them…well, I'll be." Staring at the fire, then back to Serena, Cecil narrows his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I have to make peace with Alaric," she says.

Liam shakes his head in disbelief. He can't let her turn herself over to Alaric. *I have to keep Serena from going to Alaric, and keep Alaric from finding Serena.*

"Will he be at your camp?" she asks Liam.

Cecil snorts. "No sense in headin' for the noose just yet," he says. "How about somethin' to drink first?"

"I suppose if that is the polite thing to do," Serena glances at Liam who nods his encouragement. Resigned, she follows Cecil to the kitchen.

Liam walks to the window, pulling down one of the plastic vertical blinds to peer outside. Dawn is already creeping through the trees, pushing away shadows and calling forth the birds. No sign of any wolves.

"Poseidon be graced—I want one of these!" Serena exclaims.

Liam turns to find Serena and Cecil standing in front of the fridge, each with a bottle of beer in their hands. "A beer?" he asks.

She shakes her head, handing the open bottle in her hand to Liam. "No, the taste doesn't agree with me. I meant one of these." She points to the cooler. "Rayne has to dig holes in her kitchen until they fill with ocean water for cold food storage. I've stumbled into them more than once. Not pleasant, especially first thing in the morning. She would love this."

Liam puts the bottle to his lips, taking a drink. "I can get you some."

"Can you? I mean—it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"Just gotta get over to the grocery store, they have plenty."

"It's that easy? They just—hand them over?"

"Well, I mean, I have to pay for them and all…"

Serena's lips part in wonder.

"What?" asks Liam.

It's just weird to think how everything you need is just so available to you," she shrugs. "In The Deep we have to make everything, or hunt it. Or hope it floats by in a pile of Ungainly trash."

"Let's consider it an early birthday present." He smiles, but it quickly fades as he realizes the dire consequences associated with her birthday. "Why are you here, Serena? What’s your plan?"

She glances at Cecil, and in a matter of moments she is brought back into herself. Liam watches as her spine goes rigid. Her lips press together, and her chin tilts down. He can almost pinpoint a slight glow at the roots of her hair which lends a certain mystic ambiance to her appearance.

The most disturbing part for Liam is the shadow that falls across her face, darkening the skin beneath her eyes and emphasizing the tiny lines at the corner of her mouth. They are the type of lines that look as though they should not appear for several years to come.

"I need to make peace with Alaric because sooner or later, my people will by bound for The Dry. Our water is poisoned, I think beyond the point of recovery, and our food sources are dying—the corals are turning to bare bones."

"It's happening all over the damn world," Cecil grunts.

Liam looks at him in surprise. It's not like the man gets a newspaper. He doesn't even have a television.

"Half my life has been spent in the oceans," Cecil says, taking offense to Liam's questioning gaze. "It ain't hard to notice the differences from even fifteen years ago."

"Even so," says Serena. "We cannot seem to migrate somewhere safer, like many other sea creatures can do."

"Neither can we," mumbles Liam. "Believe me, I've tried."

"You can't leave?" Serena asks, mouth dropping open.

He raises an eyebrow. "You think we hang out for, what? The beautiful view?"

Now she blushes as her mouth snaps shut, the subtlest shade of pale blue running across her face. All Liam can think is there is no way she could blend in with humans.

She clears her throat. "Moving away from Society at first is just… cumbersome. Your whole body grows heavier, and you just start to feel so —"

"Tired," Liam finishes for her.

She nods.

"And you really just want to go back to your own bed," he continues. "Or…wherever you sleep."

She smiles.

"But if you can keep going, the feeling changes. The weight settles deep into your bones, and it—it—"

"Hurts," Serena finishes for him this time. "And then the pull begins. The further you go, the more spread out you feel. Like part of you has been left at Society."

"It gets tighter, and tighter. A thin thread that is about to snap." Liam shudders in memory.

"Has it ever?" asks Serena.

"What," Liam looks at her. "The thread?"

She nods.

"No. I've never made it that far."

"Me neither," she says. "I felt it when I was swimming out to find your boat. But I think it got better the closer you came."

"It's because you're leavin' the heart of the people," Cecil speaks up from his armchair.

Startled, Liam almost jumps. He forgot Cecil was in the room, and he certainly didn't remember the old man making his way to his chair.

Serena walks over to the old man, standing in front of the dark fireplace. "What do you mean 'the heart of the people'?"

Cecil just shrugs, staring at the fire with glazed over eyes.

"Like, where they live—their caves?" Liam offers.

"No." Serena shakes her head. "We migrated here; some say our kind came over all the way from the Atlantic. Our home now wasn't our original nesting grounds." Serena looks at Cecil again, her eyes narrow in concentration. "The heart of the people," she murmurs. "Our bloodline—the royal bloodline."

"That doesn't make sense," Liam says. "You are the last remaining heir; you have the blood. You still couldn't leave."

"But…I'm not the last remaining heir." Serena looks up at Liam.

His lips part, just slightly. He is catching on. "Because I am your twin brother."

"Two halves of a whole," Cecil whispers, drawing his blanket up to his chin. In the next few seconds, his eyes flutter closed and he is snoring.

Serena turns, grabbing the black bag that held her clothes.

"What are you doing?" Liam asks.

"We have to go," she says, walking to the kitchen. She stuffs a few bottles of water into the bag, then begins searching the cupboards.

"Wait a minute, slow down." Liam follows her, holding up his hands.

"Don't you see? The old man is right. It's us, Liam! I came to talk to Alaric, but maybe I don't have to. If we go together, we'll be okay. We have to try—we have to find somewhere safe for our people. Then we can come back and get them and—"

"Our people?" Liam asks. "They haven't been my people since they abandoned me on the dock, Serena."

Serena turns slowly, arms lowering to her sides. "I thought you wanted to help us."

"I do," he sighs, running a hand over his face. "But we have to do this the right way." He points out the window. "It's broad daylight out there Serena, and that t-shirt and jeans aren't going to fool anyone. If you want to travel, we'll do it at night when there ain't so many humans out."

"Ungainlies don’t scare me, Liam."

He smiles. "Then you know nothin' of our world, Serena. Please, let's just wait until tonight. Besides, there are a few more I want to bring with us. I have my own people to look after."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"A few more?" Serena accuses Liam with narrowed eyes. She and Cecil come out from behind a tree to meet the group in the middle of the wolfsbane patch. It is the one spot close to the edge of the forest that Liam is sure Serena can find on her own.

The pair are half an hour late, though with the way Cecil wheezes by her side, Liam can understand why. "You don't have to come, old man," he says.

Cecil tries glaring at Liam, but the effect is ruined when a coughing fit takes over.

"Well, the truck is just a bit further," offers Liam in the way of an apology.

"Will we all fit?" asks Serena.

Liam watches her scrutinize the group. Connor, Zeke, Doug, and Colin all stand behind Liam. He agonized most of the day over a plan to slowly introduce Serena to his most trusted followers—who goes first, how to do it, how much time until he includes the next person in his secret. By evening he had a raging headache and was nowhere close to a workable plan. He decided to just do it all at once, and as soon as possible. They are running out of time.

His gaze moves from Serena, who seems to be taking the situation in stride, to his pack members. They are all already on edge after the fight.

Zeke stares at Serena with one eye, the other is still swollen shut. "I remember you from the King's Massacre," he says, licking his lower lip. He lowers his gaze. "I'm sorry about your friend. That, well, it just wasn't right."

"Thank you." Serena nods back. "There isn't much about this situation that is right."

"Preachin' to the choir, sister," smiles Doug. "Glad the boat ride went okay. I offered full use of my docks and watercraft to Liam, and I extend the same offer to you. Though I suppose you don’t have much need for boats…" Doug trails off.

"You never know." Serena smiles back. "But thank you."

Liam releases a slow sigh of relief. *So far, so good.*

"Who's that, mama?" a tiny voice calls out from the back of the pack. Standing behind the five men is Darcy and her boys. Up three hours past their bedtime, the boys have mostly been subdued and quiet; the youngest is asleep and snorting, draped across Darcy's arms.

Serena lifts her nose to the air, staring at the family with wide eyes.

"They are…your young?" she asks to no one in particular.

Nodding, Liam steps aside so she can see them better. "You saw them when I showed you the camp before the King's Massacre. These boys are the only wolves born from a human mother."

"Their scent is different from the rest of you…" Serena starts, looking unsure of herself for the first time. "The wolf in them is stronger, yet more suppressed. Like they have better control."

"They do," says Colin, the hint of a prideful father's grin on his face. "No accidental transformations, not during the full moon—not even as babies."

"Yeah, but we'll see what happens with a mermaid so close," grunts Zeke.

"Yes, we will, but I shall do my best so as to not cause any problems," Serena shoots back at Zeke. Then her eyes flit to Darcy. "You have a beautiful family."

Darcy shifts from one foot to another, but holds Serena's gaze. "Thank you."

"We gonna stand here jabberin' much longer?" Cecil suddenly pushes his way through the group.

"He's right, we don't want to run out of night." Liam turns, motioning everyone forward with his arm. "To the left, Cecil—I parked at the West Coast trailhead."

Without a word, Cecil adjusts his heading and sets the pace for the group. It is slow, leaving Liam with time to agonize over every wayward sound ringing out from the forest. There shouldn't be any more wolves out tonight. Connor arranged for a series of complaints from certain members of the pack, all set to voice them at various times with visits to Alaric's trailer. He and his crew have a busy night ahead of him, so hopefully they won't get any interference. Nonetheless, Liam slows down to walk with Serena at the back of the group. He doesn't want to take any chances.

"Sleep good?" Liam asks, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

"A little," she says. "Had better luck on the floor than on one of those itchy armchairs."

Liam snorts. "I always wondered if the old man has fleas. Had an outbreak at the trailer park, once. Wasn't pleasant."

She raises a questioning eyebrow.

"Though I suppose you don't have fleas down in The Deep. I suppose you have no idea what fleas even are."

The conversation comes to an awkward lull. Liam scratches the back of his neck.

"So what's the plan?" Serena asks. "We just…see how far we can get? Because I can't stay gone—I have to come back for my people."

"Tonight is a test. We'll see if Cecil's theory about two halves of a whole is right." Liam clears his throat. The whole thing sounds a little cheesy. "And if it works, we'll leave Darcy and the boys somewhere safe and then come back to deal with Alaric. We can make runs every night if we have to, get everyone out who wants out."

"Are they in particular danger?" asks Serena, nodding ahead to Darcy and her boys.

"Alaric wants at them bad. Been tryin' to figure out the secret ever since the first was born. Every other time a woman becomes pregnant by one of us, she miscarries, or gives birth to a human child—to the right, Cecil!" Liam yells up to the old man stumped by a fork in the trail.

Cecil grumbles something then ambles down the path on the right.

"It's just—he's desperate to keep the pack going," Liam says. "Without having to rely on the newly abandoned." He glances at Serena.

Serena nods, her face softening. "I know how heavy a burden that can be."

There is a long silence as they walk, Serena's words hanging in the air between them. The scrape of boots against the ground grows louder when they reach the gravel-covered parking lot.

"Here we are," says Liam, nodding to the only vehicle there. It is a rusty pick-up truck and looks as though it won't even start.

"You've been takin' care of her," Cecil says, a wide grin spreading across his face.

Serena looks at Liam with an arched eyebrow.

"Should've seen it when he gave it to me," Liam mumbles to her. "Didn't even have all four wheels." He pulls a set of keys out of his pocket

and tosses them to Connor. "Keep it slow. It's not like there are seatbelts back here."

Connor and Doug climb in the cab of the truck, while everyone else crams into truck bed. They sit shoulder to shoulder, Serena in between Liam and Darcy.

Serena leans in, whispering to Liam, "What are seatbelts?"

He sighs. "If we get pulled over, just please don't talk."

She looks like she has another question on the tip of her lips, but she squeezes them shut and nods.

Liam looks around at Darcy. As the truck engine sputters to life, the oldest boy falls asleep against her shoulder, and the youngest she has been carrying begins to wake up.

"We'll take it slow," he says. "If they start to feel any pain at all, we'll turn around at your word."

The deep crease between Darcy’s eyebrows softens.

"Mommy?"

All eyes turn to the three-year-old boy in her arms.

"Shh, honey," Darcy whispers. "We are going on a little trip. Go back to sleep and I'll wake you up when we get there."

The boy doesn't close his eyes again. They are wide open as he stares up at the sky, stars littering it with bright pinpoints of light. Liam shudders, remembering the last time they tried to leave. Spasms overtook the youngest worse than the other two. He doesn't talk about it anymore, but Liam knows he remembers. Little hands tighten around his mother's waist.

"Do you know my friend, Serena?" Liam asks, hoping to distract him. There is a bump as the truck leaves the gravel lot and ambles onto hard pavement.

The boy's eyes shift from sky to mermaid as he realizes he is sitting next to a complete stranger. When Serena smiles at him, he shrinks further into his mother's chest.

Without a word, Serena looks away, staring at her feet stretched out in front of her. But the boy's gaze lingers on her, and Liam watches as it changes from fear to fascination. Liam can hear scales emerge before he leans forward to see them.

Only a few midnight blue scales emerge on her bicep; enough to take the shape of a five pointed star. The boy's eyes light up and he reaches out with a shaky finger. Serena glances at him, nodding her encouragement.

Emboldened, he gives one of the scales a soft poke. The scale retracts underneath smooth skin. Serena wipes away the trickle of blood it leaves behind.

His eyes grow even wider. "Does it hurt?" he asks.

"Not as much as it used to." She shrugs.

"Oh, can you make a pirate ship?"

"Robbie," Darcy scolds her son.

But Serena just laughs. "That might be a bit complicated."

The wind increases as the truck picks up speed on the highway. The entire group hunches down.

"How about this?" asks Serena, almost nose to nose with the boy so he can hear her. Scales retract and emerge in different places and both Darcy and Robbie stare. Finally, the scales settle into a pattern. It is one long wave up and down her arm. It shifts, creating the effect of a rolling breaker in midnight blue. Moonlight glares against the scales, just as it would the surface of the ocean.

Robbie looks away. "The ocean scares me," he says.

The waves disappear into Serena's arm. "Why?"

"Sharks," Robbie says. "That eat you alive!"

Darcy laughs. "His older brothers, just trying to scare him."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about sharks," Serena assures him. "They don't like the way people taste."

"How do you know?" asks Robbie.

"Because." Serena leans in further, whispering, "They told me."

"Oh," Robbie's lips round out. "Wow, you can talk to sharks?"

"In a way." Serena winks at him.

This late at night, the truck only passes a rare car traveling in the opposite direction. When the bright lights of a biker bar break up the monotony of the dark, Darcy and Liam exchange a glance. This was where they turned around last time. So far, no one feels anything.

Hope and excitement bloom in Liam's chest. Cecil is right; as long as Serena and Liam are together, no one is bound to the same spot. A thought crosses his mind, and he frowns. If the trick truly is Liam and Serena being together, what is everyone else feeling back at the park? Are they writhing in pain—pain that worsens as Liam and Serena move further and further away?

Liam leans over and bangs on the window separating the cab from the rest of the world. When Connor turns to look, Liam makes a motion holding his hand up to his ear.

Call.

They need to check in with someone back at the trailer park, and make sure everyone is okay. Connor can do it from the quiet of the cab.

But Connor shakes his head no, and points to the road ahead of him.

Blue and red flashing lights are dotted across the road in a barrier.

"What is it?" Serena asks.

"Police checkpoint," says Liam. "Probably looking for drunk drivers."

"Well, we're not drunk," says Serena. "Right?"

"Right," he responds. "But this ain't gonna go well."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I promise I won't talk," she mumbles, staring at the blockade of five cop cars spread across the road.

A uniformed officer motions for Connor to pull over. As the truck squeaks to a stop, Liam watches an older gentlemen stumble on top of a chalk line drawn on the asphalt.

Here is hoping Connor didn't try calming his nerves before the trip with a few drinks.

"License and registration," barks out the officer before Connor even has his window all the way down.

As the men in the cab shuffle through the glove box, Liam glances at each of the passengers in the rear. The panic is clear on their faces. Though Liam suspects the authorities at least know of their trailer park, the clan takes great pains to steer clear of organized government. No one has birth certificates, passports, or social insurance numbers, and the generic documents they do have are all forged—like the license Connor is now handing the officer.

The officer takes a long time with the license, studying both front and back with his flashlight. He looks up at Connor, shining the light square in his eyes, then looks back down at the license.

"Richardson!" he calls out with a strong Canadian accent. "Come oot here, will ya?"

"What you got?" another officer responds, walking over.

Just as the first officer begins to hand over the license, lips forming a question, Richardson stops, staring at the children in the back of the cab. "Oh, no. Everybody out—now."

"Is there a problem?" Connor opens his door, one foot out of the truck.

"Not you!" the officers shout simultaneously.

"Sit back down, sir." The first officer closes the door for him, then hands the forgotten license back through the window.

"Officer, please." Darcy's voice is soft, but it cuts through the storm of male ego better than a strong howl on a silent night. "My boys just fell asleep, and they've had a rough day. I don't want to wake them."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but all minors have to be buckled in, aye? It's the law."

"Our minivan broke down up the highway," Colin chimes in. "This gentlemen here was kind enough to offer us a ride to the next motel we come across. And believe me, I know he's sober—I wouldn't let my entire family ride with him otherwise."

Robbie, still sitting in his mother's lap, whimpers, "Mom, my legs hurt."

"Hush," she says, "we'll take care of it in just a minute."

Liam and Darcy exchange a glance.

The old man performing his balancing act trips, crashing into the side of the truck.

"That'll put a dent in her," mumbles Cecil.

The group is momentarily forgotten as Richardson calls for more help with the drunk. He is growing more belligerent by the second, and additional officers only worsen the situation.

When the officer finally turns his attention back to the Liam and his clan, he looks resigned. He has bigger problems to deal with tonight. "I'm going to let you off with a warning this time," he tells Connor. "Next motel is two miles up—it ain't the Hilton, but I suggest you don't go no further than that until you have car seats for these kids, aye? A lot of drunks are out tonight, and they all seem a bit crazier than usual. Must be the full moon."

"The moon isn't full," says Serena.

Liam's heart stops. He stares at her in shock.

Her eyes go wide too, as if she can't believe she just spoke.

"What was that?" the officer shines the light directly in her eyes. Liam can see her pupils closing up almost instantly, but instead of shrinking circles, they go narrow like a cat's eyes.

"I just meant to say that the full moon is tomorrow night," Serena stumbles over her own words.

"You high or somethin' sweetheart?" Richardson asks, peering closer at her eyes.

Robbie shifts beside Serena again, rubbing at his knees, wrists, and elbows.

"Heh." Liam laughs, flopping his arm around Serena's shoulders. "New contacts. Kept losing her glasses."

Richardson turns off his flashlight, arching his eyebrow at Liam. "Just make sure she doesn't get behind the wheel—not tonight."

"Will do…uh, sir." Liam taps on the cab window. "We're okay to go—straight to the motel."

Liam lets out a slow sigh of relief as the flashing lights blink out behind the shadowing trees as the road curves inland.

"Mom, it hurts…" the oldest boy says. He has woken up, and he is doubled over grabbing his head.

"Oh, Aiden honey come here." Darcy hands Robbie over to Colin and wraps her arms around Aiden to whisper in his ear.

Liam exchanges a worried glance with Serena.

"Colin." Darcy looks up at her husband. "We can't do this again—I won't put them through it."

Colin looks at each of his sons, as if weighing the possibilities. They don't seem to be in unbearable pain. One is still asleep.

"Colin!" Darcy yells, exasperated.

"I know, I know—but we can't drive right back through the roadblock." He shifts Robbie on his lap. "We have to wait until morning—or at least until the cops are gone."

Glancing over his shoulder at the commotion in the rear, Connor steps on the gas, slowing only once the motel comes into view. He pulls in the parking lot, steering the truck well away from the office and from any other cars.

Piling out of the back of the truck, everyone lends a hand helping the boys. The only one that remained asleep suddenly jolts awake and pukes over the side of the truck.

"I'll get a room," Connor announces, glancing at the puddle forming on the ground. "And some extra towels."

Anxious eyes glance around the parking lot, but no one else is out this late.

Liam rubs the back of his neck. *This was a bad idea*. He takes stock of his group. Darcy and Colin are tending the boys as best they can, with Zeke's help. Cecil is bent over examining the dent in the side of the truck. Doug and Connor are at the office. Serena…*where is Serena?*

Turning in a full circle, Liam spots her still in the back of the truck. "Are you okay?"

She straightens from her hunched position, hand over her chest. "I don't feel anything." Pausing, she closes her eyes and touches her stomach, knees and head, as if making sure. "I feel perfectly fine."

Liam turns. "Zeke!" he calls him over. The pink and purple bruises on his face are ugly; it's a wonder the officer didn't ask about it. "You doin' okay?"

"No, man, not at all. I think adrenaline from when we were sittin' at the roadblock sort of masked it. But now it is full on. I feel stretched too thin, like my joints might pop out of my sockets any second." He leans over rubbing his knees. "I've never left before. Is this how it is every time? I'd take a thrashin' from Alaric's thugs over this any day. Every day, in fact."

Connor and Doug return, keys and towels in hand. "One room so we can stick together," He says, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead. "It's going to be a long night. The pain only gets worse the longer we stay away."

"Someone needs to stay close by the roadblock, so we know the moment the cops leave."

"I'll go," Zeke announces.

Liam nods. "Stay out of sight."

Zeke lopes off into the woods. Liam knows he'll have it easier, remaining that much closer to home. Besides, with a face like his it is better to stay in the shadows; the group doesn't need any unwanted attention.

"Someone should stay with the truck. Keep an eye on things from out here in case someone has seen us."

"Got it," Doug offers.

"Thanks," says Liam. "Come in and get me if you need a break. Everyone else, let's get inside."

Serena and Liam watch as Darcy ushers the boys in while Connor holds open the door.

"You don't feel anything either, do you?" Serena asks as soon as everyone is out of earshot.

"No," Liam shakes his head.

"I told you, two halves of a whole—keeps you pieced together." Cecil says from behind, startling them both.

"Yeah but just us? It's not helping anyone else." Liam narrows his eyes.

Shrugging it off, Cecil ambles toward the motel room where Connor waits, still holding open the door. "I never said anythin' about everybody else."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Once inside the small room, Liam almost immediately has Darcy, Colin, and their three boys settled in on the bed. The family takes up the entire queen-size mattress and is squished up against each other as it is, with the parents flanking either side.

"It's okay," Darcy says when Connor offers to ask for cots. "Being close like this will help them."

Cecil settles into the only armchair the room has to offer, claiming it as his own.

"I'm gonna hang here, help keep watch for a little while," Connor says, leaning against the wall and pulling down a section of the plastic blinds to peer outside.

Serena walks to the small kitchenette, which is still part of the same room—but at least it has a dark corner. She leans against the wall, then slides to the floor. She looks how Liam feels: tired, worried, and helpless.

He glances around the crowded room one more time. The boys in the bed aren't asleep yet, though they are trying. On either side of them their parents massage their legs and arms. Darcy holds a small trash can for any more vomit episodes. By the window, Connor appears relaxed, but the subtle shifting from foot to foot tells Liam he is uncomfortable. Cecil is already snoring in his armchair.

There isn't anything else Liam can do for anybody. They just have to ride it out until morning, hoping no more humans try causing problems for them. He sighs, then sits down in between Serena and the cheap kitchen counters. He tries smiling at her, and she does the same, but it is painfully obvious that both are forced.

A whimper comes out from one of the boys.

"I'd help them if I could," says Serena softly.

"I know," Liam pats her hand. "It's funny—of all the people that can leave…"

"It ends up being the only two that won't leave anyone behind," Serena finishes for him.

There is a long silence, then Liam removes his hand to shove it in his pocket. "Alaric can't know about this."

"I'm not sure I'm going to tell any of my people. If they know I can leave at any time, convincing them of my leadership skills is going to be that much harder."

"A secret then," says Liam.

"Can we trust everyone here?"

Liam nods. "I'll talk to them. They are gonna want to put this night far behind them." Liam yawns, stretches, then reaches up to grab a granola bar out of the complimentary basket on the countertop. He opens it and hands it to Serena.

"We should save it for the others," says Serena.

"Trust me, no one feels like eatin'." He holds the granola bar out to her.

She takes it, breaks it down the middle and hands half of it back to Liam.

They chew in silence, staring at the door to the bathroom in front of them. Its paint is cracked and peeling, and there is a long stain—probably coffee—running down one side of it.

"Do you like it?" Liam asks.

Serena runs her tongue around the inside of her mouth, then swallows a large chunk of the granola bar with a grimace. "It's awful."

He laughs. "I suppose you can't wait to get back to your salmon."

She shakes her head. "I don’t eat fish."

"Seriously?" He looks at her. "You're like…a mermaid vegetarian?"

"Undine." She nudges him with her shoulder.

"So what do you eat?"

Serena touches the back of her head to the wall, a small smile forming on her lips. "All kinds of seaweed, cooked or raw—always better with a touch of salt. Sea lettuce soup with hijki. Nori rolls, if you can avoid the hidden salmon. And there is noodled kelp—not even the guards can resist Rayne's noodled kelp. A bowl of that can let me get to The Dry, unescorted."

"Who's Rayne?" Liam asks.

"My mother, or…at least the one who raised me," says Serena. "She runs the orphanage. Though with no more calflings, she has turned the orphanage into a dining hall. With her help we'll have all the maidens proficient in the art of eating with utensils in no time."

Liam furrows his eyebrows.

"I'm preparing them for life in The Dry," Serena explains.

"Ah, because of the…"

"Because our ecosystem—our home is poisoned. It is why Rayne is so desperate to get me used to eating fish. All the plants are dying."

"Eatin' fish can't be all that bad," tries Liam.

"That's not the point. Without the plants, soon there would be no fish. Already plankton are in decline."

"Which means less carbon dioxide absorption and less oxygen output."

"What do you know of it?" Serena asks, a teasing tone to her voice.

Liam shrugs. "We did some learnin' growing up."

"Oh," Serena says. "That's…good."

Liam sits up straighter. "What I know is that corals are disappearing faster than the rainforests. They are worried that ocean acidification might trigger some sort of mass extinction event; because it has happened in the past."

"It's already started," Serena mumbles.

"So what are you doing about it?" asks Liam.

She shrugs. "We're talking about growing more food in The Dry, if we can." She takes a deep breath. "My goal really is to prepare them to live in The Dry, permanently. Though I don't want to say it outright; it would create too much resistance. The Undine are really stubborn."

"Tell me about it," says Liam.

"Quiet your mouth," says Serena. "You are glad you met me; I know it to be fact."

"I thank Poseidon himself every night for the midnight-blue Undine standing in a circle of yellow wolfsbane flowers."

Serena yawns. "Yes, well, continue praying to Poseidon, because if things continue down this path, this midnight-blue Undine, along with the rest of Society, will be here for good."

Liam smiles, but can't help but think that wouldn't be such a bad thing. Complicated, of course, but not all bad.

"I have to get some sleep," says Serena, glancing over at the bed. It appears as though the family has settled down for the most part.

"Do you want the floor, or the floor?" Liam asks.

"Nope. I'll sleep in here," says Serena, walking onto the bathroom's cold tile floor and stepping into the bathtub.

"Oh—for the water?" Liam asks.

"For the privacy," says Serena. "Freshwater doesn't do it for me." She turns around. "Good night Liam of Clan Werich."

"Good night, Serena, Queen of the Undine."

Serena smiles and closes the door. Liam can hear the shower curtain rings slide across the metal bar. He settles back down against the wall and the thin, brown carpet. Bending one leg, he lays his forehead against his knee, wondering how he got to this point. Four werewolves, three kids, a worried mother, an old man, and a mermaid—all hiding out in a dingy motel room, afraid of what the humans might do to them should they be discovered. This isn't how he imagined his reign, and he is positive it is not how Serena imagined hers.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Something nudges Liam's foot, and his eyes shoot open. His brain works to catch up to his body, and finally he comprehends Darcy in the bathroom in front of him, helping Robbie as he expels the contents of his stomach into the toilet. Rubbing his eyes, Liam checks his watch. Five a.m. They made it through the night—kind of.

He stands to unwrap a plastic cup and fill it with water.

"Here," he says and hands the cup to Darcy.

She nods in thanks, sleep lining her eyes, and wrinkles creasing her forehead.

Pulling his hand away, Liam sees Serena pull back the shower curtain to peer out. She keeps the rest of her body behind the curtain, as if she were caught in the middle of bathing herself. The entire situation makes Liam uncomfortable and he backs away from the room. Turning to the kitchenette counters, he fumbles through the complimentary basket, looking for the coffee packet. The sound of crying stops him cold.

"I want to go home, Mommy."

"I know honey, we're going soon." Darcy strokes Robbie's hair.

"When?"

"Very soon, I promise." Darcy makes a pointed glance at Liam and the question hangs in the air between them. *When?*

He shrugs, trying to keep the desperation off his face. He confirms again on his phone. No missed calls, no texts. *Where is Zeke?*

The crying starts up again, and Liam runs an agitated hand through his hair.

Another sound echoes out of the tiny bathroom. It is another type of moan, but higher pitched, and it wavers as though it is trying to find its place in the world.

Liam watches Darcy and the child turn, confusion knitting their eyebrows together. Serena, fully scaled, peeks out further from behind the shower curtain. Dark blue scales frame her face, highlighting her darker shadows. Because of it her cheekbones appear more withdrawn, her chin

slightly more pointed. The angular look is mystifying, and the boy shrinks into his mother.

Determined, Serena allows her lips to part further. She finds her harmony within the small space and she ascends a series of tones, each note soft but sustained into the next note, all melting together in a perfect melody.

Serena pushes the curtain aside, putting her entire scaled body on display. Opening up her lungs, the sonorous notes breeze past her lips. Her chest expands as she calls back in the air and pushes it out again, inserting layer and depth.

It is when she adds lyrics to the song that Liam has to grip the countertop just to keep himself from moving toward Serena. The words seem familiar, yet he can't discern what they mean, nor where one ends and another begins. Still, he feels as though if only he could get a little closer to their creator, he might be able to unlock their mystery.

Serena steps over the railing of the tub, closer to Robbie. With eyes wide, and chin tilted to look up at Serena, he moves toward her, letting go of his mother's hand. The pace of the song quickens; she is telling a story. Liam wonders if Robbie can understand it any better than he can.

Cocking his ear, Liam can almost hear an underlying base beat, growing slowly louder. Serena sits on the edge of the tub, so she is eye to eye with Robbie. The child doesn't look scared, just…fascinated.

Rich and vibrant, music envelopes the entire room like silk strands weaving their way around Liam's waistline, caressing his skin and pulling him forward. The story climaxes, notes pulling together in an interlacing ambiance. When the final sounds are released, Liam cannot discern the exact point in time in which they end. Long after Serena's lips are closed, he swears if he strains hard enough, he can still make out fragments of the song.

Laughter from a stranger passing outside of the motel room draws Liam from his trance. He turns to find Zeke in the open doorway, staring into the bathroom, as are the rest of the occupants of the room—Cecil included. Their eyes are pinned on Serena, bodies leaning forward.

"You heard the song too?" Liam asks Zeke. "From all the way at the checkpoint?"

"No," Zeke makes an effort to shake his head and eases back on his heels. "I came to let you know the cops have all left. But…" He licks his

lips. "I would walk a hundred miles further, pain or no, just to follow that voice."

"That's a mighty powerful song," Cecil mutters, glancing at Serena.

"Come on, Robbie. Let's get you in the truck." Darcy straightens his shirt and steers him out of the bathroom.

"It's okay, Mom. I feel better now."

"Good honey, now go get your shoes on." Before Darcy follows him out, she turns to Serena. "Thank you—your singing was like none I've ever heard."

Serena shrugs. "They say my mother—or…our mother…" She glances at Liam. "Could sing like that too."

"I have to say, a voice like that might make for better healing than any medicines I've ever administered." Darcy smiles and leaves the room.

"Can you give me a minute?" Serena asks Liam after Darcy leaves. "I just need to compose myself a bit before we go."

"Sure," Liam says, voice cracking.

Serena closes the door and Liam turns to those in the room who all seem to have trouble putting themselves into motion.

"Well, you heard Zeke. Cops are gone. Let's go home. Connor—grab that blanket. We might have to all hunker down in the back of the truck just so we don't get pulled over again."

"Right," Connor says. He steps toward the bed, but his eyes are still locked on the bathroom door.

Liam claps his hands, twice. "Snap out of it, everyone. We can probably make it back before anyone else is up at camp. Nobody will realize we even left—hopefully."

The room reluctantly whirls into motion with the logistics of sorting out whose shoes and jackets are whose, and who gets the leftover snacks—everyone having apparently gained their appetites back.

Liam casually kicks the wrapper of the granola bar he and Serena shared last night under the counter. The kids look downright famished.

The door to the bathroom inches open, and Serena peeks out just as she did from behind the shower curtain.

"Are you dressed this time?" Liam asks, joking.

"Yes, it's just…" she peeks out further. "I'm sorry for doing that—I didn't realize how much attention it would attract."

"It's fine," Liam assures her. "I think it helped everyone. You okay? You look kind of…pale."

"I don't know," Serena opens the door the rest of the way, moving slower than she usually does. "Not enough sleep, maybe." She pauses, surveying the room. Everyone is busy gathering their things and getting ready. "What?" Serena asks the one person staring at her.

"Nothin'," says Liam. "It's just I was thinkin' about how your song calls to us."

"Yeah, it does that. You, other Undine, the ocean… I guess."

Liam hands her his jacket. "When we were meetin' in the forest before, you called for me, right?"

"Yes," she answers, slipping shaky arms through the sleeves.

"And it was just me that showed up, like none of the other wolves heard it."

"So?"

"I'm wonderin' if you can call to just one." He shrugs, moving to the motel room door and holding it open for her. "Might be useful at some point."

Chapter Twenty-Six

It is still dark as the group rolls into camp. Those in the back of the truck hide under a motel blanket. It is so worn they can see the moon through the faded fibers. The almost complete circle is an ominous warning. It promises one more night of peace, then the full moon will be upon them, along with Alaric's deadline.

Liam pulls the blanket down as they park right in front of Colin and Darcy's double-wide trailer. All three boys have fallen asleep again, and Liam helps carry them inside while Serena and Cecil wait in the back of the truck.

"It's good to see your neighborhood up close," Serena tells Liam once he returns to the truck.

The camp is quiet and still, and her voice carries through the rows of shabby trailer homes.

Liam folds his arms over the edge of truck bed and nods. "Home sweet home."

"It's…nice."

Liam can tell the words are forced. "Homesick?" he asks.

"Maybe a little."

"You know you are free to go back anytime. I'll walk you halfway." He smiles.

She laughs. "Do you remember what happened the last time you tried to walk me home?"

Liam rubs a hand across his throat at the memory of the trident tips pressed hard against him. Her friend Ervin and two other guards had almost run him through. "Nothin' I couldn't handle—as long as big sis was there…"

That makes her laugh again.

Connor gets out of the cab and hands Liam the keys. "See you at the alley in a couple hours?" Liam asks. He pauses, watching Connor run a hand over his face, then changes his mind. "Just go get some sleep. Call when you are up."

They say their goodbyes, leaving just Liam, Cecil, and Serena together.

"We should get out of here before people start waking up and smelling mermaid," Liam says. "I'll drop you and Cecil off. Wanna ride up front?"

"I prefer to remain under the moon, if that's okay."

"Well I'm not okay with it," Cecil rolls to his knees, and crawls toward the tailgate on shaky hands. "I'd take air conditionin', the radio, and a cold beer over the open sky any day."

Liam holds out a hand to help Cecil down. "You know she ain't got air conditionin'—and the radio's broke."

Cecil pauses, looking at Liam with a hopeful eyebrow arch.

"Fine, hold on a second," Liam rolls his eyes, then disappears back into Darcy's trailer. He re-emerges, a bottle of beer in hand.

Cecil chuckles and the pair get in the cab.

Liam hands over the beer. "Here, you earned it."

"Oh, hell—I didn't do nothin' but sleep in an armchair all night." Nonetheless, Cecil pops open the beer and throws his head back—his Adam's apple moving up and down as he finishes at least half the bottle. He shifts in his seat, looking at Liam. "What was your plan anyway? Run away? Leave the rest of your brothers with Alaric?"

"Hey, I intend to give them a choice. If they want to stay with Alaric, so be it. Let them squirm in misery under his thumb if they want to."

"Still don't change the fact they're your brothers," Cecil says.

Liam glances at the old man, then turns the key. The truck sputters to life. "I am the youngest of the clan—why would they follow me?"

Cecil tips his bottle, pointing it briefly toward Liam. "You may be the youngest, but you were born to lead. It's in your blood. I suspect Alaric knew that almost right away. He feels threatened by you." Cecil sighs, the noise pushed out in one big puff through his nose. "Why do you allow him to take your blood anyway?"

Scratching the back of his neck, Liam thinks carefully about how to answer. He has asked himself the same question many times. "If I refuse my blood, he'll either try to take it by force or he'll turn to the others who have shown the most control over their wolf—like those boys. Alaric will find a way to get what he wants, no matter what."

Cecil snorts.

"I'm biding my time, old man. I'm not going to make any big moves until I'm sure the outcome will be in my favor."

"That's funny," says Cecil. "Because while you bide your time, your sister is running out of hers."

Liam glances over his shoulder at the blankets in the back of the truck. "I know."

"So, you've got mermaids who are coming ashore—and they will, whether they want to or not. Then you've got wolves who want them dead—and oh, by the way, neither species can leave the area."

"So?" Liam knows all this. He presses down on the pedal, urging the truck to go faster.

"You've got Serena standing in the middle of all of it—and then there is you, the only one that can escort her safely away."

A long silence stretches between the two men. When Liam pulls the truck off the road, Cecil finally speaks. "So who do you save? Serena—or everyone else?"

Liam glides to a stop next to Cecil's house, and turns off the engine. "What would you do, old man?"

Cecil shrugs. "I think trying to mediate between the two species may be a lost cause. But it really doesn't matter."

"Why?" asks Liam.

"Because," Cecil finishes the rest of his bottle. "I think you've already made your choice."

* * *

"Serena." Liam taps on the side of the truck once they are in front of Cecil's home and parked. He frowns when the lump under the blanket doesn't move. Lowering the tailgate, Liam pulls at the cover. It slides down from over her head and shoulders. She is asleep—fast asleep.

"Do you think she’s okay?" Liam whispers as Cecil ambles past. "She looks kind of sick."

Cecil grunts. "If you ask me she's looked sick ever since she got here. Could be her radioactive hair or her Smurf-stained scales. Just carry her in, will ya? She seems to like sleeping in the bathtub."

Liam looks at Serena for a long time, his eyebrows furrowed. By the time Cecil has gone inside, propping the door open after him, Liam takes the rest of the blanket off of her. He hoists himself into the truck, and squats next to her prone body. None of her scales show underneath the t-

shirt she wears. Liam peers closer at her skin. It is dry and flaking. The healthy glow Liam always swore illuminated her is no longer there.

He slides his hands under and almost reels back over the edge of the truck when he lifts her up; she is a lot lighter than he expected. It's as if she has hollow bones.

Serena stirs, but her eyes don't flutter open as Liam expects. Instead, she curls into his chest and arms, making his job all that much easier. He walks inside. Cecil has already used the bathroom and is busy making his breakfast.

Boots squishing over lumpy carpet breaks the silence of the dark hallway, and Liam nudges the bathroom door open with his foot. When he lays Serena down, she still doesn't open her eyes, and Liam's frown deepens.

"Goodnight, Serena." He says, bending down to plant a kiss on her forehead.

Liam returns to the kitchen and finds Cecil at the stove.

"Think she'll be hungry when she wakes up?" he asks, tearing into a package of bacon. "I haven't had someone to cook for in a long time."

Liam shakes his head. "She's a vegetarian."

"A what?" Cecil looks like he can't comprehend the question. "Don’t she eat fish?"

Liam smiles. "Nope."

"Well, more for me then. She can have an apple."

"I think she’s sick."

"I'll keep an eye on her…" Cecil offers. "I won't be noddin' off anytime soon. What will be more interestin' to see," he points his spatula at Liam, "is if anyone else in the clan felt the pain as you and Serena left—or if her people underwater did."

Liam nods. "Yeah, maybe you can mention it to her when she wakes? I'll be back after nightfall; I think today will be pretty busy."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It is a long day of dealing with politics in the clan, recruiting more numbers, and trying to cover his tracks with Alaric. By the time Liam has a break to go check on Colin, Darcy, and the boys, the stars are just beginning to reveal themselves. He walks toward the double-wide trailer with quick steps and his head down, hoping to deter anyone else from approaching.

A barely discernable shout echoes out from the forest beyond the trailers. It is so faint, had Liam been inside, he is certain he wouldn't have heard it. He pauses, turning his ear to the sound. It comes again, but not as a shout this time—it is more like several elongated notes. They are panicked, sending chills down Liam's spine. His adrenaline spikes, even more so when he realizes the sound is coming from the direction of Cecil's home.

Turning, Liam runs. Before he reaches the tree line he is on all fours, well into his transformation. His clothes bulge, pushed out by a larger body underneath, finally ripping at the seams. He tears the last of the shirt off his shoulders with his teeth, then leans into his run. The eerie, sonorous tones get louder and more urgent as he runs. His legs won't go fast enough.

Finally, the house comes into view and the door is hanging wide open. Skipping the steps and the small front porch altogether, Liam bounds into the house.

Cecil and Serena both stand, shoulders relaxed and a slight hint of humor on their faces.

The wolf sniffs the air and does a quick round of the house. There is nothing amiss. Walking back into the living room, he transforms just so he can speak.

"What happened?" Liam asks. Chest heaving from the run, Liam stands bare naked in the middle of the living room. "Are you okay?"

Serena picks up a blanket from the couch and throws it to Liam. "I was just practicing."

"Practicing what?" He catches the blanket and it goes limp in his hands. His eyes dart around the room, still looking for a threat.

"Would you cover yourself, man?" Cecil spats. "No one here needs to see that."

Serena stifles a laugh with the back of her wrist.

Glancing down as if he just now realizes his nudity, Liam wraps the blanket around his waist. His breathing has calmed, and he narrows his eyes at Serena.

"I was singing—practicing my call," she explains. "Cecil suggested I try calling for just one person. Apparently I can," she smiles at Liam since he stands there as proof. "And not only that but I can invoke a certain emotion."

"So you used me to…" Liam points his finger at Serena, taking a step forward. He pauses when the blanket slips loose. Tightening the knot, Liam glares at Serena. "I was in the middle of somethin' important."

She glances at the blanket. "Okay."

An old table clock ticks, and outside a pair of birds exchange calls. Liam sighs. "It felt like…like my chest was about to explode. It was like watching a small child drown, and I could save him if only I went a little faster."

"Did anyone else hear?" asks Serena, looking out the window. "Is anyone else coming?"

Liam rubs his nose with this sleeve. "I don't think so—I just took off. They would've caught up to me by now if they were followin' your voice. That—well that is pretty incredible." Liam smiles. It quickly dies from his face. "But don't do it ever again."

Serena nods "Sure. Unless I mean it."

"And thanks for keeping the blanket handy." He tugs on the knot again, just to make sure it will hold. "Now what?"

Serena almost mows Liam over on her way out the door. "I have to try one more thing."

Liam glances at Cecil, who just shrugs, then turns to plop down in his armchair.

"Wait!" Liam calls after Serena. "Can't I at least get dressed first?"

Light on her feet down the steps, Serena takes long, quick strides across the yard to the pier.

"Guess not," he mumbles to himself.

Before she reaches the end of the dock, she is singing. The notes are faint, but it is an uplifting tune. Rich, bass-like undertones accompany

high sonorous notes. It is pretty, but it doesn't invoke any kind of panic or temptation for Liam. This song isn't meant for him.

Stopping behind Serena, both stand at the end of the pier. After a minute or so of song, ripples bounce across the water, unnatural in their direction and speed.

"Serena," Liam whispers. The ripples move underneath the pier, then out the other side. "Who are you calling?"

The rest of the night has gone still, save for the turbulent, dark water.

Serena gasps, and Liam looks at her before following her line of sight. Bioluminescent hair, followed by a strong, angular face rises up, crowning the water. Liam recognizes the merman as one of the guards—not the biggest one, but the one that is never too far away from Serena.

The guard's eyes lock onto Serena, and as he floats forward the sharpened tips of a trident surface. The golden pikes fall forward, angled toward Serena.

Liam's breath catches in his throat. "Serena!" he manages to croak out as he moves toward her. The merman throws the trident and it flies through the air lightening quick. Leaping in front of Serena, Liam extends one hand and the stem of the trident slams into his palm.

He swings it out. The weapon is lighter than he expected and Liam overcorrects on the other side. Serena has to duck to avoid being clotheslined by it. But Liam keeps his eye on the merman, who is now almost at the pier.

Making an exerted effort to control his newfound weapon, Liam points the tips down, aiming right between the creature's eyes. The trident is stopped short with a loud clank as it clashes with another trident. Sparks burst out, scattering across the surface of the water.

"What do you think you are doing?" Serena's words are edged with fury.

"That's what I'd like to know." Liam's lip curls up in a snarl.

When Serena moves into his peripheral vision, arms crossed, foot tapping on the wooden slats, Liam realizes she is looking at him, not down at the water.

He glances at her, hesitant to take his eyes off the merman. "Wait, you mean me?"

"Yes, you." She holds out her hand, palm open.

The merman shrinks back into the water until the ocean seeps over his shoulders. Liam relaxes his stance, and slowly lowers the trident.

She makes an impatient motion with her fingers, and holds her hand out further.

"Oh," Liam places the trident in her hand.

"He was delivering my weapon. I left it behind so as not to draw suspicion here."

"I thought he was…" begins Liam.

"What?"

Both hands drop uselessly to his side. "I thought he was trying to hurt you."

The merman hasn't said a word. He is silent in the water, bobbing slightly with the waves and watching them. It’s creepy.

"Well…" Liam hikes the blanket up a little further on his waist. "You just be careful with that thing. It is sharp."

Serena crosses her arms. The merman is studying Liam, and Liam thinks he can see a small smile on the creature's face.

"Liam," Serena sighs. "May I introduce you to Kai? He is Second in Command of the Queen's Guard."

"Second?" Liam asks.

The smile disappears from the merman's face, which gives Liam some satisfaction, like he has just scored a point.

"And," continues Serena. "He is my…well my…"

Her hesitance in naming their relationship is even more satisfying.

Another point.

Serena scrunches her forehead in thought, then finally looks at Kai. "He is special to me. And is never, ever to be harmed." Her voice has gone soft, and so have her eyes.

Minus one.

"Kai," she says, walking around Liam and toward the merman. "As you well know, this is Liam of Clan Werich—my twin brother who has just as much of the royal bloodline running through his veins as I do." She arches her eye at the merman. "Understood?"

Kai nods his head and says his first words. "Yes, your majesty."

All at once, Serena's jawline tightens, her eyes blaze, and she slams the butt of her trident against the dock. The merman's words have pissed her off.

And we're back up.

Kai knows it, too. He swims forward to rest his upper arms on the pier. Serena is barefoot, her one damaged toe peeking out from under the wide pant bottoms of her jeans. The water calms, lapping gently against the supports underneath the pier. A strong, calloused hand reaches for her foot. Just a few light brown scales dot the back of his hand.

Liam glances down at his own hand where several short hairs rest. Also light brown in color, they are wiry and tough like the werewolf hide that emerges.

The scaled hand hovers over Serena for a second, then sets down gently, covering her damaged toe.

Liam watches Serena's white knuckles loosen from around her trident. They turn pink as blood returns to them. Her lips part slightly, and she takes a deep breath.

Kai reaches up to her jeans, feeling the rough material between two fingers. "What are you wearing?" The merman scrutinizes Serena's clothes, then glances at Liam. "What is *he* wearing?"

Liam looks down at the blanket wrapped around his waist. His fist tightens over the knot, praying it doesn't fail him at the most inopportune moment. He clears his throat. "I'll just…be over here."

Serena nods, giving him an appreciative smile.

Turning his back on her is difficult, but he only walks the length of the pier until his feet hit solid ground and he turns around again. He watches the pair as they talk. She is on her knees, leaning out over the water. Kai cranes his neck back so his curve matches hers. They fit together perfectly. Liam wonders if they know that.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Liam keeps glancing over his shoulder to sniff the air for other wolves, but he can't get the smell of salt and wet sand from his nose. The two mermaids together make a powerful scent. He crosses his arms and taps his foot.

Serena giggles.

His spine itches in irritation. The fact that they have yet to even glance in his direction makes him feel like a third wheel.

They are inching closer together, each of them smiling.

But it is when the smile drops from their faces, and their lips begin to part, that Liam goes still.

Crap—are they going to kiss? Yes, yes they are kissing. Gross.

Liam fights back the urge to turn away and gag.

When Kai's hands slide up Serena's arms, grasping her above the elbows, Liam's whole body tenses. Kai tugs and Serena falls into the water above him. There is a big splash, and then silence. No longer fighting back any urges at all, Liam is racing toward the end of the pier.

"Serena!" He skids to a stop right where agitated bubbles are racing up toward the surface. He shifts from foot to foot, debating whether to jump in after her. But even now, he can't get past all the emotions the ocean invokes: fear, rejection, desire.

"Serena!" he yells again, squinting into the depths. He can just barely make out two forms intertwined together. Just as he convinces himself she is okay, another element begins to surround them. It is a swarm of small white specks, pushed back and forth by the currents underneath. Liam drops to his knees, squinting even harder. He sees Serena reach out to catch a few white specks with the palm of her hand. It is the same thing Liam might do with snowfall.

Finally, the two mermaids break apart and rise to the surface. They stay like that for several moments, foreheads touching, murmuring to each other.

Serena turns away and pulls herself up onto the pier, waving away Liam's extended hand. As she stands next to him, smoothing her hair and

straightening her sopping wet clothes, he tries not to stare too hard. But her skin is no longer flaking and dry. Most importantly, her glow is back.

"Kai would like to speak with you a moment," she says, picking up her trident. "I'll wait for you inside."

Before Liam can respond, she has turned on her heel and is walking down the pier.

"She looks much better," Liam says to the form he can hear emerging from the water.

A spray of water splatters across wooden planks and a thump hits the pier behind Liam.

"We can't go long outside our element," Kai says, standing up on the wooden planks. "She needs to be allowed to return home at least once a day."

Liam gives a short laugh, turning around to face Kai. "If I could send her back permanently, I would."

"Yes, well—I suppose she is not easily *made* to do anything." The hard lines running along Kai's jaw soften as the pair find something in common. Kai takes a deep breath, looking toward the house. "Speaking of which, we must not linger too long."

"Why?" Liam is turned off by his proper manner of speech. With Serena, it is kind of cute—with Kai it is just annoying.

"Because," says Kai. "I believe she intends to turn herself in to Alaric tonight." Kai glances out toward the full moon, just now cresting the horizon. Serena's birthday and Alaric's ultimatum is tonight.

"She can't," Liam turns, taking a step toward the house.

A heavy hand on his shoulder stops him. Liam turns, bristling at the touch.

"Apologies." Kai retracts his hand. "But she is determined. Pushing her in one direction will only make her push back harder. You must appear to be on her side. Just guide her in the right direction with small nudges. Kind of like a mother octopus nudges water toward her eggs for fresh oxygen."

Liam rubs his temple. *Serena wants to turn herself in to Alaric tonight and we're sitting here talking about octopus mothers?*

"Fine, whatever. But if tonight doesn't go well, maybe you should have your people standin' by."

"It is already done, werewolf." Kai utters the last word in a sneer, which causes Liam to bristle even more.

"You should know, *merman*, that I have people fighting with me for your cause. If you come ashore, they cannot be harmed."

"And how shall we tell them apart?" Kai asks.

Liam snaps his mouth shut, stumped.

"Did they not participate in the King's Massacre?" Kai continues. "Maybe we can only target those we recognize?"

Still at a loss for words, Liam doesn't say anything. In fact, his people fought on the side of the werewolves. They all followed Alaric's orders. Liam looks at Kai sideways. Would they even recognize their individual wolf forms? He thought they all looked the same to the Undine; at least Serena has told him as much. He shakes his head, bringing himself back to the moment. Serena is probably planning her meeting with Alaric right now. "I'll be there and I'll be sure to point them out."

"As you say." Kai nods. He takes a deep breath and lowers his voice. "She told me, you know."

"Told you what?"

"About leaving—that if the pair of you are together, it is possible."

"Oh," says Liam, scratching his side. "She said we should keep it is a secret."

"The secret goes no further than me, I can assure you. But you must promise me something, Liam of Clan Werich."

"What?" Liam asks.

Kai takes a step closer. "That if things get bad, and I suspect they will—possibly even tonight…" He trails off in hesitation. "That you will take her and go."

Liam can see Kai's Adam's apple rising to the top of his throat. He swallows it down and repeats the demand with steel in his voice. "Take her and go—far away from here."

"I will, I promise." Liam says, his voice just as low.

Kai turns away, looking out at the moon. Giving him time to compose himself, Liam stares down at the wooden planks they stand on.

Finally, Kai turns back. "We thank you for your protection."

"No worries." Liam holds up his fist, knuckles forward.

There is an awkward pause while Kai studies it, one eyebrow raised.

"It's like a handshake. You just…" Liam demonstrates a fist bump with his other hand.

Tentatively, Kai extends his own arm, fingers curled into his palm. They touch knuckles, but it isn't a bump. It lingers for several seconds. Each hand is similar in shape and size. The only difference is the light brown scales Kai has on the back of his hand compared to the light brown hair on the back of Liam's.

Part III:

Serena

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"You left without saying goodbye." Kai moves in closer to the pier, tilting his chin up to look at Serena.

She bends until her knees touch hard wood, then rocks back until she sits on her heels. "It wasn't goodbye."

Kai glances at Liam, still standing at the other end of the pier, shrouded in dark shadows. "You don't know that, especially taking current company into consideration."

Serena sighs; she doesn't want to argue, especially not about Liam.

"I've missed you," she says. *Your touch, your eyes, your goofy jokes. I miss feeling…safe.*

With the last thought, Serena knows she could never leave Kai. The aching hole in her chest blooms wide and she almost loses her breath over it. "Kai…I really do…"

He pulls himself up, water sliding off his chest and arms. Wrapping one hand around the back of her neck, their noses graze. "Then come home with me."

The temptation is too much to bear. She just has to lean forward a bit, that's all it would take. Release the earth and embrace the depth—sinking, sinking down with Kai until they reach the kingdom together and spend the rest of their days safe within each other's arms.

She rests one hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat quicken. It is the rhythm all Undine share, steady and strong like the waves beating against the shore. It is the pulse of her people, and if she doesn't fight for it, it will sputter out and die.

Her hands squeeze around the edge of the wooden planks as she secures herself firmly to the pier.

Kai can feel it; he can see the resolve harden in her eyes. He lets go of her neck, sinking back down into the water. "I knew you'd say as much," he

whispers.

She swallows hard. "I'm not sorry. I'm doing the right thing." *Am I trying to convince him, or myself?* "The council?" she asks, her voice cracking. "Their assigned duties are going well?"

"You mean besides mine?" He busies himself with skimming the palm of his hand over the surface of the water, but looks at her out of the corner of his eye.

She frowns. "Bitter much?"

"What?" His frown matches hers.

"Nothing," she mumbles, glancing at Liam, still standing where the pier meets land with a blanket wrapped around his waist.

"No one has devoted much time to their newly assigned duties," Kai says.

"Why not?"

"Because it has come to light that our council is preparing Society to live in The Dry, and that does not sit well with everyone."

"Our council," asks Serena. "Not…just me?"

"It caught them off guard. They mostly went along with it so as not to lose their reputation. They don't want to be viewed as unable to control the queen. Better to make it look as if it was their guidance all along." Kai is smiling again.

"Well—that worked out better, probably even more so if I were there."

"Rayne helped; she's good at dropping hints and spreading rumors while Undine eat in her hall."

"She is well? And Ronan?" Serena squeezes the wood planks even harder thinking of everyone she left behind. "Mariam? You have to check on her. She doesn't get many visitors, and she is so clumsy. What about Cordelia? Is she too big even to traverse the passageway to the archives? Did she finish the book—"

Kai places his hand over Serena's own. "All are well, but all wait your return."

Serena bites her lip, choking back tears that catch her off guard.

Putting a finger to her lips, Kai smooths them out. "A queen does not bite her lip."

A single drop of ocean water glides from his finger to her lip. Nostalgia rushes over Serena, and she closes her eyes. It is the rich, salty taste of rain water flowing over the land and washing the earth's minerals into the

seas. Serena savors even the few grains of gritty sand left behind on her lower lip. She can smell Rayne's jellied seaweed on Kai's breath, and if she tries hard enough, she can pretend the steady drumming of water against the pier is high tide, rushing in to fill the Great Hall coming to rejuvenate all of Society.

Serena feels Kai's hands slide up her arms and lock above her elbows. When he pulls her in after him, she does not fight it.

Sliding into the ocean and into his arms. Serena finds his lips with her own. He presses into her, hands at first hovering cautiously near her waist, then wrapping completely around her. Despite their proximity to the shore, it is deep near the pier and Kai and Serena continue to sink, her legs wrapped around his tail.

Serena keeps expecting to hit the bottom, but it never comes. Bubbles rising like effervescence, they give the impression that she and Kai are sinking faster. Tiny pricks fizzling up and down her bare arms pull Serena reluctantly from her embrace. Her eyelashes flutter open and she turns her head. They are surrounded by bright white, pink, and green specks. They rise slowly, pushed back and forth by the current.

Kai is still nuzzling Serena's neck with his nose. She smiles, giving him a playful bump to catch his attention.

Look.

She watches his eyes light up as he glances around.

It is a mass, synchronized spawning of polyps. The coral's eggs rise in a colorful blizzard to mix with sperm of other polyps. Kai and Serena are surrounded by the ocean regenerating itself. She reaches out, tentatively. A few polyps bounce along her open palm, then move on their way, in search of their mate.

Kai nudges a few more toward those she just released. She smiles at him then gestures toward the surface. Heads emerging into The Dry, Kai and Serena inhale their first breath of air together, but they can't stop looking down in wonder at the vibrant spectacle below them.

"The polyps are spawning a few days too early. It usually comes after the full moon."

Kai gives a wry smile. "Guess they miss you, too." But the smile does not touch his eyes. His face, for just a moment, is overcome with grief. "You really are leaving me again, aren't you?"

Serena feels her heart wrench for him. "Yes," she says, voice wavering.

"I'll come with you this time," Kai says, drawing nearer if that is even possible. "It is my job, after all."

Serena feels his tail wrap around her legs in a possessive, protective gesture. She shakes her head. "No, I need your help with a few things in Society."

"What?"

"I might be calling for Isadora. If I do, let her leave her quarters, but follow close behind."

"It shall be done…" he trails off, looking away.

"What?" asks Serena.

"She's done well, you know. She has completed the potion, even while confined to quarters."

"She has?" Serena asks. "How do we know it is right?"

"Hailey did some testing and confirmed it."

"Good," Serena blinks. "That is good."

"Do you still believe her to be a traitor?" asks Kai.

"To be honest, Kai, I don't know. But who else could it be?"

He doesn't respond for several seconds. Finally, he looks at Serena. "Okay. What else do you need?"

The pair murmur with their heads together for a few more moments, chins dipping in and out of the water. Serena can hear Liam's impatient pacing behind her on the pier. Once she finishes passing instructions to Kai, she kisses him one last time, determined to savor the heat of his breath against her lips and the tingling sensation he sends straight to her core when he looks at her with those wild, green eyes.

He releases her waist, and they move apart. Suddenly panicked, Serena reaches out, latching onto his wrist.

"Kai. Don't drift," She says, pleading with her eyes. "I will fix everything. Please just trust me."

"I do, Serena Moon-Shadow. I do."

Stealing away the last bit of confidence Kai can give her, she turns and pulls herself up onto the dock, leaving the safety of his arms and the ocean behind.

Chapter Thirty

"Octopus mothers."

Serena hears Liam mumble the words as he enters Cecil's trailer. She smiles to herself as she stares into the mirror. There is a moment of silence from the living room and she focuses on her reflection. Running a finger down the side of her face, her smile disappears. Skin and scales are healed. No more dryness. The small bout in her waters was enough to wash away the arid dry that seeps into her very bones.

What should be gratitude for the restorative session is drowned out by dread. Straying too far from the ocean will never be possible; whether she is with Liam or not. Her people will always need to be near the beaches, and it is quite possible it will have to be these beaches. She will need to make peace with the werewolves, no matter what the cost.

"Serena?" Liam's voice is steady, though she can hear a slight twinge of panic.

"Do not worry," Serena calls from the bathroom. "I am still here." *For now.*

Sighing, she backs away from the mirror and turns to the door. Time to go; Liam will not take this well. When she steps into the living room with her trident, both Liam and Cecil stand staring at her.

"What?" she asks.

Cecil coughs. "You look different holdin' that trident," he says. "More complete."

"Yeah." Liam nods. "You'll never pass as a human now."

"I will take that as a compliment." Serena smiles. "But right now, I don't need to pass as a human." She takes a deep breath, bracing herself for blowback. "I am going to see Alaric. I am going to make this right—for everyone."

She forces herself to hold Liam's gaze, trying to read his face. It is pure stone. He doesn't flinch or twitch, he doesn't nod or shake his head.

Cecil looks from Liam to Serena, and finally breaks the silence. "Well? Are you going to stop her?"

"No," says Liam.

"You're not?" Cecil and Serena ask together.

Liam crosses his arms, looking as if he is getting ready to defend his decision.

"Why not?" Serena narrows her eyes. "If this is some trick to get me to __"

"It's no trick," Liam interrupts, letting his arms go limp by his side. "As much as I want to whisk you away to I don't know—deserted northern territory, tie you down and keep you safe from the horrors that have become our lives—I know I could never leave my clan behind." His shoulders sag, and a dark shadow passes over his face. "And if I respect you at all, I have to respect the fact that you could never leave your mer —," he pauses, swallowing hard and starting over. "You could never leave your people behind, either."

A rush of emotion runs from Serena's chest and straight into her head. Gratitude, admiration, and relief, all underlined by the strong sense of grief.

"Thank you, Liam," she manages to choke out.

"But there will be no negotiating with Alaric. We are too far past that. There will be a fight, Serena—with probably more losses. Are you ready for that?"

She twists her trident in her hand, watching the tips make a neat circle in the air. *If he has me, he'll have to honor his promise. Everyone else can live in peace.* But she can't bring herself to say the thought out loud.

"You have to understand—this man doesn't stick to his word. All he cares about is his own pride. And that is something that was damaged the moment his mother abandoned him." Liam steps forward, eyes boring into hers. "And he is determined to make all Undine pay for that."

Serena can almost feel Liam trying to impose his will on her. She parts her lips, ready to push back.

Cecil interrupts the exchange. "So you're not going to take her and leave?"

Liam makes an effort to tear his eyes from Serena. "What?"

"You're not going to run and hide—leave everyone behind?" Cecil asks.

"What? No, I just said. We are going to figure this out together." Liam turns and paces, fingers going to his temples.

"Oh." Cecil hangs his head, staring at the ground. "Well, I suppose the pair of you had better get out of here."

Liam is still pacing. "We'll be out of your hair in a minute, old man."

"No—you'd better go now. Take the back way."

"Why?" asks Serena.

In front of the fireplace, Liam has finally stopped pacing.

"Because," says Cecil. "While you two were out on the pier, I called Alaric."

Serena's mouth drops open.

"And told him the mermaid is here, and about to run."

Chapter Thirty-One

"You…you what?" Liam asks. He leans forward, looking as though he is ready to lunge for Cecil.

"I'm sorry, son. But like I told you in the truck this morning—I could've sworn you made your decision. I thought you were going to take her and run; leave all your brothers behind in Alaric's clutches."

"So you called him here?" Liam takes two long strides toward Cecil.

Serena beats him there, standing in between the two. "It's okay, right? I was going to him anyway."

"No, no—since he is chasing you now, he'll spin it so your sacrifice doesn't count. Besides, he's going to be pissed by the time he gets here."

"Okay," Serena says, shooting a glance at Cecil. "Well, let's go. We'll figure this out."

Cecil takes a step back and holds up his hands. "I thought it would be better to be here with your brothers, under Alaric's thumb, than not be here at all. I couldn't let you go—you are the only one that has shown any promise of leading the pack, and the only one that has ever paid me any gratitude. I didn't want you to abandon the rest of my sons; not like I did. And not like her people did." Cecil gestures to Serena.

"I get it…okay," Liam rubs his temples. "But you don't understand—I won't be here under Alaric's thumb. It will be under his executioner's axe."

Instead of going wide with shock, Cecil's eyes narrow, as if he doesn't believe Liam.

But Serena nods; she knows Alaric well enough.

"And you're right." Liam looks up sadly at Serena. "This morning, after we discovered we could leave together if we stayed together, I had convinced myself to take you and run, even if you resisted. But that all changed after I saw you with…him."

"Kai?" asks Serena.

Liam nods. "After seeing you two together, it's pretty obvious. You'll never leave him."

She shakes her head. "That doesn't matter right now. We need to get go—"

Her sentence is cut off by an ear-piercing howl coming from the woods. It’s joined by several others surrounding the house.

The chorus sends chills down Serena's spine. In response, armored scales emerge up and down her arms, legs, and torso.

Almost immediately Liam drops to his knees, wrapping his arms around himself. "Serena—calm down!"

She watches as long, spiky hairs emerge out of the back of Liam’s neck. There is a sickening sound, like paper tearing, and Serena realizes it is Liam's skin.

Hunched over on the ground, he pleads with her. "Can you stop it?"

"No Liam." She glances at Cecil, then back down to her brother. "Right now, we're going to need the wolf." She picks up her trident and heads toward the back of the house, just as she hears the front door knob jiggle.

"Just a minute!" Cecil calls out in a shaky voice. "I'm indecent!"

"Aren't we all," mumbles Serena. "Come on, Liam—you can transform while we run."

Past the bathroom and the bedroom, there is a loud banging. The back door practically bends inward as something heavy crashes into it. A hairline fracture creeps down the middle of the cheap, wooden door.

"Okay—bathroom window it is," Serena decides.

She brushes past Liam, who is still on his hands and knees—or just on paws. Serena can't tell which. His clothes hang off him in shreds and his fur scrapes against her scales. Once in the bathroom, she stands on the toilet to look out the window. It is dark, but the area around the house is well-lit by the full moon. There are no wolves in sight…yet. "We'll have to do this fast," she mutters. "Lock that door."

The latch clicks shut and she hears claws scrape against it, on her side of the door. Refusing to look at her brother, Serena concentrates on the window. The glass is already pulled open. Aiming her trident at the screen, she thrusts forward. The screen pops out just as one of the doors to the house bursts inward, but Serena can't tell if it’s the front or the back of the house. Maybe it is both. Shards of wood clatter against the floor.

"Now, just calm down. She ain't here no more. Went back home. Said somethin' about—" Cecil's explanations are cut off with a grunt. Something heavy thumps against the floor.

Serena turns back to the window and throws her trident through. She takes two steps back until fur tickles her behind her knees, then she

sprints. One jump off the edge of the toilet and a dive, headfirst, through the window. She clears the building and tucks her body for the landing. Rolling once, then twice, she stops by her trident in a crouch.

"Liam!" She whisper-yells to the vacant window. There are only low moans inside.

Come on, come on. Serena's eyes jump from one shadow to the next, expecting them to lunge forward any moment.

There is another crash inside the house. Finally, a mass of fur lurches through the window, straight over Serena's head. She follows it with the tips of her trident. Familiar as she is with Liam, she has no idea if that is the underside of her brother or another.

He lands light on his feet and turns, eyeing her with a growl.

Assuming a fighting stance, her trident at the ready and one foot slightly behind the other, Serena studies the wolf. Light brown hair—and lots of it. They all look the same to her.

He stalks closer, then turns his head to display the crescent moon mark just underneath his eye.

Shoulder blades that were up in her neck relax. "What now?" she asks the animal.

He nods his head toward the forest.

"Lead the way," she says.

Under the protection of the trees, Liam and Serena skirt the clearing around to the front of Cecil's house. They should both be running like mad right now, but neither can seem to leave Cecil behind, despite his betrayal.

Liam slinks around shrubs, avoiding loud, crackling foliage on the ground, and Serena does her best to follow in his footsteps. Stopping behind a fallen tree, they both crouch. With a clear view of the front steps of the house, they watch a pair of men drag Cecil out and down the steps.

"Oh no," says Serena.

She feels something push against the scales on her arm. It is Liam, trying to tell her something.

"What?" whispers Serena.

Liam nudges at her scales again with his muzzle, then sniffs.

"Oh," she frowns. *They can smell me.* Slowly she retracts her armor. *It is just for a few minutes,* she tells herself.

"We searched. They aren't in the house," a man announces as he comes out, several wolves on his heels.

Beside Serena, Liam lets out a low growl.

"Shh," Serena hushes her brother.

Another man walks into the clearing. Long black hair billows over a black cape.

"What do you want us to do with this one, Alaric?" One of the men kicks Cecil just behind the knees, and the old man falls onto all fours. Several of them laugh.

"Ungrateful little bastards!" Cecil coughs out. "I raised you!"

"Wrong, old man." Alaric walks toward him. "I raised them. The only thing you did was accept fish-head babies, encouraging their actions. You are an accomplice to their betrayal. No better than any of them."

Cecil quiets his hacking and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "You're right, Alaric. It's my fault."

Alaric stops in front of Cecil. "What?"

From under thick, bushy eyebrows, Cecil looks up at Alaric. His voice is steadier than Serena has heard in a long time. "I should've drowned you the moment I laid eyes on you."

"Shut up," Alaric snarls.

Cecil only raises his voice. "I should have stayed on the pier where you were abandoned by your own mother, just to hold your head under the water until your body went limp."

"This is your last warnin'," says Alaric. He pulls a long, silver knife out of a hip scabbard from one of his men.

"You are an abomination," Cecil spits out. "A mutant, an…unholy freak!"

Alaric raises the knife above him.

"No," Serena whispers.

"Your lineage…" continues Cecil, staring Alaric right in the eye. "Will die with you."

Beside Serena, Liam lets out a whine as Alaric slashes the knife in front of him. Serena covers Liam's snout with her hand, holding him back at the same time. She buries her face in his chest, unwilling to watch Cecil slump to the ground with his last breath.

Shifting on his front paws, Liam shakes the shrubs in front of them.

Standing around a still body, all men in the clearing turn their heads toward Liam and Serena.

"Liam," Serena whispers. "Time to go."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Alaric releases the cape on his back. By the time it floats to the ground, a coarse, black mange covers his entire body. Those that aren't already wolves follow Alaric's lead and transform. They tear through the tree line, claws scraping across the fallen log Serena and Liam hid behind.

Running side by side, Serena and Liam duck under low hanging branches and leap over dense shrubbery. Serena's legs are powerful, taking long strides through the forest, but she has a hard time keeping up with Liam.

He slows to a quick lope. She grimaces when he eyes her; eventually the wolves are going to catch up to them.

Sharp growls pierce the air. Serena looks back as they run. Their pursuers are spread out behind them. Those on the end angle nearer, closing in on them like a clam shell about to snap shut.

Liam gives a short bark, catching Serena's attention and running right alongside her.

"No way," she says. "I'm not riding you."

The growls behind them are louder now, and the formation of wolves all around are squeezing in.

Impatient, Liam snarls.

"Fine." She rolls her eyes. "Just this once." Taking a short leap off a boulder, Serena swings one leg up and out, landing right behind Liam's shoulder blades.

He sinks slightly under her weight, but takes shorter strides and adjusts. Blades of moonbeams slice through the canopy above, providing just enough light for them to navigate the forest.

Serena grasps onto the thick hair behind his neck and leans into him. Running faster now, he pulls ahead of the closing trap. One of the wolves on his right flank lunges, just catching Liam's hind leg. Stumbling, Liam pitches forward and Serena is thrown from his back. They both roll, knocking into each other and then a tree.

Hoisting herself to her knees, then her feet, she stares at her hand. It is a wonder her trident is still there.

Forewarned by a whoosh of air, Serena thrusts her trident out, parrying a paw swiping for her neck. Next, she turns her trident upside down, stabbing her spikes into the ground in front of Liam. Another wolf lunging for him runs into the stem of the trident instead.

Liam on his feet, Liam extends his claws on either side of the trident, digging them into the wolf's shoulders and pulling him forward. Liam lets out a ferocious roar, one that shakes Serena to the bone. Spittle flies from Liam's fangs onto the face of his victim. Pulling hard, Liam slams his victim's head into the trident and the wolf falls unconscious to the ground.

More wolves are already coming, and although Serena wishes Kai or Murphy were by her side, she has to admit that Undine and werewolf make a good team. Light on her feet, Serena uses her trident to both their advantages. Liam exerts brute strength where Serena cannot, pummeling his opponents with twice the power she has.

Serena catches on that Liam refuses to fatally injure them. She follows his lead; she wouldn't want to lose her only partner right now. When there is a break in fighting, Serena and Liam look at each other, both breathing hard. He nods to a low hanging branch above them.

"Okay," says Serena. "Give me a boost."

She steps onto the back of his shoulder blade and he heaves himself up, lifting her up the tree.

They run again. This time Serena flies through the trees while Liam shadows her below.

Just like she did as Werewolf Liaison, Serena leaps from tree branch to tree branch, traversing the forest. Each time she arcs into the sky, she feels the pull of the moon fighting against gravity to keep her in the air. This time it is easier to let go—she needs to keep an eye on Liam.

As she lands on one branch it bows underneath her weight. A rogue wolf leaps at the same time, swiping for her legs. Liam intercepts him, plowing into his midsection. They roll on the ground and Serena spots another wolf closing in. His steps are light, sneaking up on Liam while he is preoccupied with another. Serena throws her trident, pinning his back leg to the ground.

The painful yelp causes Liam to turn. When he realizes what happened, he rears up, then slams the wolf's head into the forest floor. Clamping down on the trident with his jaws, Liam plucks it from the soil, twists, and releases so the weapon sails through the air toward Serena.

She catches it, a smile wide on her face, and they run again—her above and him below. Leap, arc, land—and a flutter of feet. Leap and arc. This time she can see the tops of several trailers. They are closing in on the camp, which hopefully means Liam's reinforcements.

Her muscles and her lungs scream for her to stop, but adrenaline pushes Serena forward. Up ahead, two wolves step into Liam's path. Serena angles to the left and Liam follows below. It happens again; the wolves step into the path but do not attack. They are trying to control where she and Liam go.

We are being corralled. But the thought has come too late. Just as she leaps to the next branch, a net, camouflaged by the canopy above, drops down. Strings tighten, clipping her at her ankles so she falls. On the way down, a branch knocks her trident from her hand. The net continues to tighten until the ends are looped around her, cinched down tight. She hits the ground and all the air is knocked from her lungs.

"Liam," she manages to croak out. Dark shadows dart all around her—she can't seem to focus. They tug and pull at the net she is in. "Liam?" she tries again, but her mouth seems so dry. One large shadow, silhouetted by the moon behind it, blocks out all others. It comes closer to Serena and her vision goes fuzzy at the sides.

"Take little miss blue fish to the warehouse."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Serena!"

Her name comes to her, but it is far too early to get out of bed. She didn't get nearly enough sleep.

"Serena!"

She tries to say something, but her lips barely move. Only a short babble of syllables comes out.

"Your majesty!"

At the title, Serena's eyes fly open.

"I thought that one would get you." Liam says, coming into view sideways. Serena lifts her head off the ground and it roars with pain. Liam straightens out, and their surroundings come into focus. They sit on a dirt floor, surrounded by a ring of old tires.

"Where are we?" she asks. She tries bringing her hands to her head, but they are tied together and chained to a pole sticking out of the ground.

"The fight ring," answers Liam, whose hands are tied as well. He leans against a pole, shoulders slumped. A large bruise covers one side of his face and he has a bloody lip. Pulling at something around his neck, Liam grimaces.

"What is it?" Serena asks, peering closer. A wide metal choker squeezes so tight, she can see his skin going slightly red around it.

"It's so I can't shift," he says. "If I try, the choker will crush my neck, killin' me."

Serena nods. "A fight ring?" she asks. "Is he going to make us fight each other?"

Liam tries raising his hands in an ignorant gesture, but the chain isn't long enough and they stop short midway up his chest. He sighs.

"I don't know what he is going to do. Anything is possible at this point." He bends down to wipe his forehead with the back of his hands. "Are you okay?" he asks. "You took a pretty hard hit to the head when you fell."

Trying to ignore the pain until now, Serena focuses, taking stock of her body. "Nothing broken, I think. My side hurts when I breathe in, and my

head feels like it is split open." She glances at Liam as she pushes herself to a sitting position. "What about you? Your face doesn't look so great."

"Hey, careful what you say about my looks. Twins, remember?"

"Right," Serena smiles but can't bring herself to laugh. Memories of the night until now come flooding back. "Cecil?"

Liam shakes his head. "Gone," he croaks out.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, staring down at the dirt floor.

"Oh, hell. He wasn't long for this world anyway." Face crumpling in a brief moment of grief, Liam turns it into a strangled laugh. He takes a deep breath and rubs his knuckles under his nose. "I'm just glad none of my other people were there."

"Do you think Alaric knows about them?" Serena asks in a hushed voice.

"I don't know." Liam picks up a handful of dirt and lets it fall again, running in between his fingers. "Listen, Serena. If you make it out alive, and I don't—"

"Liam don't," Serena interrupts. "Just don't."

"I just want you to know," he says, ignoring her. "I got you your coolers. Two of them. One red and one blue—they’re in my trailer. Happy Birthday."

Serena smiles. "Cold food storage at last, without having to dig holes in her cave. Rayne will love them. But it doesn't matter, anyway."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because one—we are *both* getting out alive, and two—" She shrugs. "I don't even know where your trailer is."

"I know where his trailer is…" a female voice drifts out from a shadowed corner of the warehouse.

"Who’s there?" Liam shouts. He and Serena both jump to their feet. Lifting his nose to the air, Liam sniffs. "I know that smell. It’s your traitor, Serena."

"Isadora?" Serena squints into the shadows; her black scales certainly would blend in. But the voice isn't right.

"Try again, your majesty," the laugh that follows is unnerving and sends chills down Serena's spine.

"I know that laugh," Serena mumbles to herself. The sound reminds her of Poseidon, and the carving that hangs above her bed. But that can't be right—no other maiden ever enters the queen's quarters.

The form steps out from the shadows and up onto the tire ring. Moonlight streaming through rusted out holes in the ceiling splashes across gaunt, high cheekbones and a pointed nose.

"Arista," Serena gasps. "What—what are you doing?" It wasn't the Poseidon over her bed Serena was remembering, it was the one over the prison. "I helped you. I released you from prison…and not so you could ally with Alaric."

"What's wrong with that?" Arista gives a teasing smile. "You have a werewolf ally."

"That's different," Serena says. "Liam is my twin brother."

"Brother, father, cousin, auntie, blah, blah, blah." Arista flips her hand in the air. "We're all related somehow, aren't we?" She turns and begins treading the circle of tires. Her scales shine light blue—pale in comparison with Serena's darker scales.

"So we both escape from prison. Had they found me they would've thrown me right back in. But you, Serena Moon-Shadow. Not you. Instead, they crown you."

Arista jumps from the tires inside the fight circle, her eyes boring into Serena. "I had to go somewhere. Couldn't stay home, but I couldn't leave either. The werewolves were the only other option." Arista pulls a small, thin knife from a braid in her hair, still walking toward Serena.

Liam lunges forward, growling as he goes, determined to intercept Arista before she gets to Serena. But the chain holding him snaps tight, stopping him just short. Arista jumps back, eyes wide. She takes a breath, then smiles.

"Ferocious, isn't he?" She says, giving a nervous laugh. "Reminds me of when I first revealed myself to Alaric. He did take some convincing. But all I had to do was sit back and watch; any fool could see Liam's alliance to you is absolute. Liam is the key to bringing down the Undine Empire; he was the one to watch." She taps the knife on Liam's nose eliciting another round of growls from him. "Your beige undergarment has a small tear in the back; did you know? Left cheek."

"Arista…" Serena warns.

"Still, it took some doing. In all my spare time I had to make sure the kingdom stayed depleted of hydrocoral."

It is all falling in place for Serena. She nods. "Without it, Isadora has a harder time predicting the future, and seeing you in it."

"Very good."

"Or did you do it because that is what the potion takes?" asks Serena. "You didn't want us to transform anyone into werewolves?

"Now that was an unfortunate side effect," Arista looks over her shoulder and lowers her voice. "One that Alaric need not know."

"Arista, you are destroying your own homeland! There will be nothing for you to ever go back to."

Stepping closer, Arista raises the knife. Moonlight reflects off the blade, flaunting itself across Serena's face. "Soon there will be nothing for any of us to go back to. I've put The Deep far behind me, Serena—and so should you."

Serena's jaw clenches. For how maddening Arista is, she is also right.

"Or don't." Arista releases her forced, high-pitched laugh again. "I think Alaric has other plans for you anyway."

"What is he going to do?" Liam yanks on his chains.

Arista runs her blade under Serena's chin. "Oh, something terrible, I'm sure. Of course, I could save him the trouble…" She leans forward, fingers squeezing the handle of the knife. When she takes another step, her foot springs back up.

"Ow!" she yells, as a pinprick of blood appears on the bottom of her toe. "What is that?" she asks, leaning down. "A tooth?" She stands back up holding a porcelain-white canine. "You," she drops the tooth and points the tip of blade at Serena. "Have all the luck."

"Yeah," Serena holds up her chains. "Case in point."

"Hey, chum!" Two large warehouse doors slide open, and Alaric, followed by five of his crew, walks in. "I thought I told you to come get me when they woke."

Quickly, Arista slides the knife back into the braid of her hair. "I was just passing on my condolences of her majesty's father," she explains, turning away from Serena.

"Yes, well," Alaric steps over the tire ring to enter the circle. He pats his stomach. "His death went toward a good cause."

Now Serena is lunging for Alaric, but her chains snap, stopping her short. "May Dagon strike you down."

Alaric has Serena's trident flung over his shoulder, carrying it like a useless sack of flour. He raises an eyebrow. "Who is Dagon?"

"The avenging devil of the sea," answers Serena, her voice low and even.

Glancing once to his right, then his left, Alaric smiles. "I don't see any seas in here, siren wannabe. You are going to have to do better than that."

Arista breaks the stretching silence with her laugh. Even Alaric looks annoyed by it. "Here." He tosses the trident in her direction.

She catches Dagon, albeit clumsily. It bounces from hand to hand until the stem hits dirt, sending the powdery substance up in a plume of air. "For me?" she asks.

"I reward those that serve me," he says before turning to Liam and lowering his voice. "But to those that betray me…"

"You kill me, and you won't have my blood to pawn off on the rest of the pack," Liam reminds him.

"I'm well aware of your blood benefits," Alaric snarls, as if he resents the fact that he still needs Liam. "Fortunately, it won't take much to keep you alive. You can remain here with a little bit of water, and some food every now and then. And you'll be a convenient punchin' bag for my guys to relieve stress or boredom whenever they wish…"

The five large men standing behind Alaric laugh, their veins practically popping out of their bulging muscles. They wear thin, sleeveless t-shirts and loose fitting shorts. Serena looks at Liam.

He answers her unspoken question. "They are plannin' to shift. Whatever you do, Serena, you have to keep your fear under control."

"Alaric," Serena says. Panic edges her voice causing the word to end in a squeak. She closes her eyes, taking deep breaths until she is calm again. Opening her eyes, she looks at Alaric. "You don't need to do this. I came to fulfill the promise made on the eve of my birth."

Alaric turns to her, fury burning in his eyes. "You turned my youngest son against me."

"He's not your son," Serena shoots back. "He never was, and never will be. And he had turned against you long before I arrived."

Sneering, Alaric turns to one of his men. "Let them in."

"Let who in?" Liam tries edging closer to Serena. "What are you plannin' to do?"

Alaric glances over his shoulder, barely acknowledging Liam's panic. "She will be sacrificed as she wishes, to fulfill the debt."

Serena reels, feeling as if she has been hit by a ton of bricks. *This is what you wanted*, she reminds herself. *This is why you came.* She swallows hard, forcing her voice to work. "And you will allow my people back on the beaches safely?"

His back already turned so he can speak to his minions, Alaric pauses, turning an ear to Serena's question. He doesn't even bother to look at her when he answers. "Your people are no longer your concern."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The warehouse doors open even wider, and the entire structure shudders. Silhouettes begin to fill the opening. They filter in, pausing as they spot Serena and Liam. The energy of these people is entirely different than that of Alaric and his crew. They are cautious, hesitant, and some exhibit a fair amount of dread.

Serena pinpoints Connor and Colin in bowling alley work shirts, and the front of Zeke and Doug's shirts both say 'Doug's Pier', but she doesn't recognize anyone else. When Connor spots Liam and Serena in chains, his whole body tenses.

Liam shakes his head, almost vigorously, letting Connor know to stand down. Connor follows the mob filling in spaces around the tire ring, shooting glances between Alaric and Liam. The four that Serena know spread themselves out around the crowd. Liam turns to Colin.

Darcy? he mouths.

At home, Colin answers back.

"Eighteen years ago, some flippy tails made a promise to us," Alaric begins, and the crowd hushes each other until they fall silent. "After acceptin' the King's only son as one of our own—"

"Why is Liam in chains alongside the mermaid?" someone shouts from the rear of the crowd.

"Shut your mouths!" Alaric snarls. "We'll get to him soon enough."

Disgruntled murmurs roll through the audience. As much as Serena hates to admit it, Alaric's assemblies are held much like her fathers…and nothing at all like hers.

"At the Maiden's Massacre, we allowed the king to keep his daughter until her eighteenth birthday. Upon which time, he had to return her to us, and we would return to him his beaches." Alaric walks the ring like it is a stage. Every head follows him. "But he didn't."

"How could he? You killed him!"

Serena couldn't be sure, but she thought it was Doug's voice. Another chorus of murmurs kicks up, some in agreement—others not so much.

"Nevertheless, Serena failed to turn herself in—we had to go and catch her."

"Netted her like a fish!" someone shouts.

Several cheers rise in response. Others are dead quiet. It is obvious how divided the crowd is. There are too many skeptical faces, unsure of which side to take. The undecided could tip the balance for or against their favor. Making a move might be too risky. Serena remains silent, hoping if given the center spotlight long enough Alaric might just hang himself.

"And with her, we found Liam—our youngest member, and the last addition to our pack."

Cheers and mumbling morph into an eerie silence as all eyes turn to look at Liam. Serena can see him lift his chin and try to swallow, made difficult from the tight metal collar around his neck.

"She coerced him!" someone shouts. "It's one of them siren spells!"

"Nah, he's been with them since day one. Tried to stop us from burnin' their wolfsbane patches," one of Alaric's crew argues.

"What exactly happened remains to be seen," says Alaric. "I'm sure Liam will tell one story—and the fish flap might tell another."

"What about Cecil?" Liam speaks up so his voice carries to the back of the room. "Wonder what truths he might reveal?" He pauses. "Oh, wait. He can't say much of anything at all now, can he?"

"What is he talkin' about?" Connor shouts at Alaric. "What happened to the old man?"

Alaric's eyes give nothing away, but his crew shift on their feet, looking uncomfortable in their own skin. It is telling enough.

"I'll check on the old man myself soon enough." Alaric tries to recover the stage. "But until the investigation is complete, Liam must remain here, restrained—for the safety of the pack."

Serena's shoulders sag. Alaric will swing the investigation whichever way benefits him. He can draw it out as long as he wants, and Liam will remain locked up like a caged dog. She keeps her mouth shut tight, closes her eyes, and lifts her face to the slits of moonlight filtering down from the dilapidated rooftop. Heavy feet drag over the dirt toward her.

"Soak it in, Serena. This moon will be your last," Alaric whispers in her ear. His words slide around her, squeezing her chest until it hurts. "But first, I have a request," Alaric shouts.

Her eyes fling open. *What now?*

He walks away from her, turns, and pauses, as if he is waiting for applause that isn't there to die down. "Call your people."

Serena does not hesitate with her answer. "Absolutely not."

He smiles. "I thought you might say that." He nods to the men on either side of him.

One immediately hunches over, and the other raises his chin high, stretching his neck. Spiky brown hairs emerge from their skin. Their fingernails grow longer and…yellower. Their eyes squeeze shut, and their bones pop as their joints move apart then meld back together.

Clothes tear, and the men are both on all fours. One of them opens his eyes, and Serena wishes he hadn't—they are bright red, and staring right at her.

Serena's heart jumps up into her throat and her legs become shaky. She grasps the pole holding her hostage in order to steady herself.

There is a groan, only this time it comes from Liam. Sweat drips off his skin, it's path made difficult by random, thick hairs that emerge then fall out. His neck slowly gets bigger, pressing against the metal collar he wears. He is resisting the change, but her fear is making it all that much harder for him. "Serena," he moans. "Control it—unless you'd rather face a whole warehouse full of wolves rather than just these two."

She glances at the crowd standing past the tire ring. Some are scratching at their skin, several have already fallen to their knees.

Quickly, Serena closes her eyes. She ignores the sounds around her and begins counting in her head. Breathe in for 1…2…3…4…5 and breathe out for 1…2…3…4…5…6…7. She repeats it a few more times and opens her eyes.

The two fully transformed werewolves slink toward her, their claws scraping across powdery sand. Their fangs, always the last to appear, signal the completion of the transformation, cutting through bared gums and dropping blood on the sand as they walk.

Serena tries looking around the werewolves stalking her. "Alaric, stop! Liam will shift; that collar will kill him!"

Alaric is biting his fingernails. "You can stop it at any time, Serena. Just sing. Call your people."

"If he dies, you won't be able to harvest his blood any longer," she tries again, not caring that desperation fills her voice.

"I have some pups I can experiment with," Alaric shrugs.

Serena's eyes shoot to Colin, who steps forward, already lunging for Alaric. He is held back by Zeke who thankfully remained nearby.

"Tick tock, fish loaf," Alaric warns.

Hot air leaves the wolves' mouths as they approach. Frantic for a distraction that will help curb her anxiety, Serena recalls two foes she has learned to endure—Sarafina and Evandre. Picturing their faces over the wolves, Serena expands her imagination, and slowly but surely, impressions of the Great Hall slide over the scene inside the warehouse. Rusty spots become glittering minerals shining out from the cave walls and the vaulted ceiling. Liam stands in the same spot Nerin would; tall, proud, and ready to defend. The mass before her is no longer a potential pack of snarling wolves. They are her people; the Painted Maidens, and even though they do their fair share of snarling, rather than a threat to Serena they can only be seen as a privilege.

"Well?" Alaric asks. Behind him, everyone has stopped itching, and no one hunches over. They are no longer in danger of transforming. "I have plans to expand, and I can't risk any interference from your people. Call them, now!"

Serena allows Alaric's image to come through. He stands distinctly against her conceived image of the Great Hall; a place she no longer fears.

"No, Alaric."

"Fine." Alaric nods toward her brother. "Liam will make a fine plaything until you do as I ask. Just don't kill him, boys."

Serena watches as the wolves divert their gaze to Liam.

"Serena…" Liam says. His voice wavers, and his eyes are wide as the wolves approach him. "Please don't do anything stupid."

Serena opens her mouth…and begins to sing.

Chapter Thirty-Five

At first it is just a humming, so low you have to strain to hear it. Serena increases her volume but not her pitch. The notes slide out like black silk—they are stealthy shadows creeping out from the warehouse and into the forest, down toward the ocean until they mix with the frothy waves at the peak of midnight.

Dark and mysterious, it is the song of her family.

Alaric's shoulders hang low in their sockets while the rest of his body goes still. Liam's wolf quiets and he no longer has to fight it for control. He is down on one knee, breathing hard, but looking at Serena with raised eyebrows.

"What did you just do?" asks Alaric, licking his lips. The song was not what he expected, and he should know; he is of her blood.

"I called for our family, Alaric," Serena says, looking at him with a smile.

He stares at her, eyes narrowing. "Be ready," Alaric barks at his crew. "She is full of tricks."

The tension in the room grows; it is as loud as the silence. At the back, a few pack members start to leave, but are herded back in by guards posted outside. Alaric paces in the ring under increasingly more glares. The shift in allegiances is beginning, and Alaric knows it.

Serena glances at Arista, who is sprawled out on the tires, running her fingers over the tips of Dagon.

There is a shout from outside. "They're comin'!"

Everybody in the room turns to the door in anticipation.

"Well," the voice hesitates. "One is comin'."

Alaric shoots a glance at Serena and snarls. He stands on top of the ring of tires, waving his arms once. "Stand aside!"

Pack members move, creating a jagged line down the middle of the crowd all the way from Alaric to the door. Serena and Liam both move forward as much as their chains will allow and stand on their tiptoes to watch who comes.

Finally, a lone form stands in the middle of the open doors. It is a dark figure; black scales in a rectangle of light. They are the black scales that match Serena's hair and Alaric's fur. They are the black scales of Isadora.

"Hello, my son." Isadora says, staring at Alaric.

Audible gasps emanate from the crowd as everyone glances between Isadora and Alaric, then back again. The resemblance is obvious. Thin noses and angled cheekbones. Gray eyes that rest in between long, dark lashes.

Serena watches Alaric's shoulders rise with a sharp intake of breath. He holds it in, watching as his mother approaches. Stiffening in an unnatural stance for any werewolf, it is apparent Alaric is caught off guard.

The path parts even wider as she walks, uncertainty lighting the faces of pack members as she passes them. As a mermaid, and the mother of their leader, is she an enemy or an ally?

Serena can't be sure, but many pack members even look jealous. Perhaps it is because Alaric is facing a daydream many of them have been having since they were cubs—a visit from their mother.

Isadora steps over the ring of tires instead of on it, her long legs shining black scales; she is fully armored. Her gaze drifts from Serena to Alaric to Arista, her eyes hardening. Isadora stops in front of Serena and turns, her posture full of resolve. "I request that you release my queen," her voice is soft, but the room is silent. No one wants to miss a word.

Alaric laughs. "Your queen was promised to me eighteen years ago. If I return her, you will never have your beaches back."

A shadow falls across Serena's face. She looks up; several holes in the roof above cease filtering the moonlight down as forms move across them. *Feather light*, Serena remembers Zayla explaining to her caste the differences in weight between Ungainlies and Undine.

Working hard to keep the smile off her face, Serena is filled with new hope. She knew Kai wouldn't be far behind Isadora, and the rest of the guard not far behind him.

Shadows continue to dart above, and Arista lifts her chin to look up. She stands, holding the Dagon by her side.

Uh-oh, Serena thinks.

"Um, there’s—"

"Keep your words to yourself, traitor," Isadora snaps at Arista.

Arista's spine goes rigid, and she finally looks like the Undine she was taught to be.

"Seems the ring is full of traitors tonight." Alaric makes a pointed look at Liam.

"But let us not detract from the issue at hand," Isadora says. "Our king sacrificed himself to pay the debt, yet you still demand the life of his daughter."

"Maybe," says Alaric, finally stepping down from the tire ring, "it wasn't a sacrifice—we took him down, fair and square."

Isadora raises an eyebrow. "Are you claiming you parted the waters yourself?"

Behind Alaric, one of his crew members coughs.

"Maybe you have an affinity to the ocean that your own people are not aware of?"

Careful Isadora, Serena thinks. If Alaric feels as though he is trapped, he will lash out.

The shadows above have stopped moving; they are in place.

"There were many witnesses on the beach that night," says Alaric. "Give me time to consult with my pack members, and together we will decide if the debt is repaid."

Isadora turns to look at Serena, who shakes her head no.

"But in the meantime, we will hold on to her majesty for you," says Alaric.

Next, Isadora turns to scrutinize Liam. If Serena had hair on the back of her neck instead of scales, it would've been standing up straight. The way Isadora looks at him tells Serena a plan, one she isn't privy to, has been put in place.

"Very well," says Isadora, turning back to Alaric. "But you shall keep our queen alive and in good health. And we shall take one of your own to ensure no undo harm comes to her."

Alaric laughs. "You…think you are going to take one of mine?"

Isadora nods. "This one will do." She points to Liam by aiming her thumb over her shoulder.

Laughter dies on Alaric's lips. "Absolutely not."

"I don't see the problem. After all, he is obviously a threat to you, chained up as he is." Isadora turns and walks toward Liam. She makes a full circle around him, inspecting him from head to toe. She runs a finger over the needle marks on the inside of his arm and she raises an eyebrow at Alaric. "Unless you need him for…something else."

Silence falls upon the warehouse once again, and Serena prays those above her don't make any noise. One wrong step will give them all away.

Alaric hesitates with his answer. Serena herself has a hard time figuring out which twin is more important to him. Finally, Alaric puts his hand in his pocket, digging out a key. "Fine," he grumbles, stalking past Isadora toward Liam.

Turning Liam roughly by the shoulders, Alaric leans over to undo the lock binding his wrists. Serena and Isadora both watch Alaric replace the key back in his left pocket.

"I suggest you keep the neck collar on." Alaric crosses his arms. "It will prevent him from turning."

"Thank you for the advice." She nods to Alaric before turning to Liam. "Exit through the doors and walk straight into the woods. My people will be there to intercept you." She turns back to Alaric. "No one follows, of course."

"Of course," he says through gritted teeth.

Liam pauses to look at Serena.

"Go, Liam," she says. "And happy birthday to you, too."

The wolves loyal to Liam shift from one foot to another. With a quiet flick of his hand, Liam signals for them to stay.

Serena stretches her neck to watch him walk through the open doors. He pauses, looking over his shoulder at Serena one more time.

Be safe, she can't help but think. But Liam only looks forward and steps toward the woods. His form becomes shrouded in shadows, and soon enough he disappears from sight.

Chapter Thirty-Six

With Liam gone, a sense of relief floods her system. When Kai and the guards appear a fight will ensue, and Serena doubts Liam could possibly keep himself from shifting. Serena takes a deep breath. Liam is gone; she needs to focus on herself now.

"What now, mother?" Alaric sneers.

Yes, what now Isadora? What are you going to do about your psychopathic son?

Isadora moves to stand in front of Serena again. If Serena stretches the chain, and her arms, as far as they go, she might be able to reach out and touch her.

"Did you know, son, that I am the Undine psychic? I see a great many things. I see certain paths that each life may take but there are always several possibilities. I have to weed out what is improbable and pinpoint the likely paths."

"And what do you see now?"

"I haven't seen anything for a very long time, son," says Isadora.

Spread out on the tire ring again, Arista stifles a giggle.

"But," continues Isadora. "Right before you were born, I saw only two paths ahead for the future of my son, both shining through as clear as if they lay before me. It was very odd, never had any life I'd foreseen held so few opportunities."

"Okay, I'll bite. Well, maybe not yet." Alaric laughs at his own joke, but no one else does. Serena wishes she could reach out and smack the grin off his face. He sighs. "What were the paths?"

"One was that you became a great leader of your people, protecting and guiding the sons we delivered to you. You kept them safe from Ungainlies, safe from the Undine's selfish desires, and most importantly safe from themselves."

"And the other?" he asks.

Isadora folds her hands in front of her. "The other is an early grave."

Alaric paces, scratching the back of his neck.

"When you were born, you were so sick you were dying. I thought that after we came up with the formula, and you had successfully completed the transformation, the early grave had been avoided." Isadora glances around the room, then back at Serena. When she turns back to Alaric she is whispering. "But now I don't think that is the case. I think both paths are still spread before you. Which will you choose?"

All eyes turn to Alaric, waiting. Serena is sure he can feel the pressure of them on his back. It is like he is on trial, but the difference between his and Serena's is that he is his own judge and jury.

Alaric is staring at his mother so intently, Serena is sure his next move will be to run into her arms and bury his head in her shoulder. He steps forward, slow and steady. When he stops he is standing directly in front of Isadora; they are the same height.

Serena watches Isadora's arms twitch like they want to reach out to embrace her son. But Isadora holds her ground with shoulders back and spine rigid. She doesn't step back, refusing to show fear in front of her son. Or rather, she refuses to show fear of her son. Instead, she decides to show trust. She retracts her scaled armor, starting at the back of her neck where Serena can see.

"Isadora…" whispers Serena.

Fingers go taut, hand extended by Isadora's thigh. It is her way of telling Serena to hush.

More scales retract. Neck, shoulders, and arms. Next are her midsection and her legs. It is the same thing Serena did with Liam when they first met after the King's Massacre. But Alaric is no Liam. Serena wishes Isadora could see that, even if she is his mother.

When Alaric speaks, everyone behind him leans in to hear. Even Isadora herself leans in slightly. He smiles. "The only grave I see, mother —is your own."

Serena gasps even before she observes the flash of a knife in his hand. Alaric's elbow rears back then forward, straight into Isadora's gut.

Her whole body shudders and her breath leaves her in a forced exhale. Extended claws dig into Isadora's shoulder, holding her in place while his forearm rotates. He twists the knife while it is still in her.

"No!" screams Serena. She lunges forward, expecting Kai and the guards to drop down any moment, taking Alaric's life before Isadora hits

the ground. But they don't. Serena's chains go taut, stopping her short once again. "Alaric, please stop!" she begs.

But the damage is done. Alaric releases his mother, pulling out the bloody knife with one final twist. She stumbles backward before dropping to her knees.

Serena drops too, still attempting to reach out. Through blurred vision, Serena can see Isadora extend a shaky hand behind her. Her palm opens, and inside is a shiny key. The very one from Alaric's pocket.

"Take it," Isadora murmurs. "Finish the job."

Alaric snorts. "Patience, mother dearest." He thinks Isadora is talking to him, referring to her own life.

While his back is turned, Serena reaches out quickly, grasping the key. She falls back on her hands, scooting to her pole and wiping tears from her eyes. Once she can see halfway straight, Serena glances around. She doesn't think anyone saw, except maybe Connor. While everyone else stares at Alaric, Connor is looking at Serena.

He nods once.

She nods back, grateful. *That is one of them on my side. Where the hell is Kai?*

The rest are still preoccupied with Alaric and his dying mother in the ring. Expressions vary; looks of horror, heart-breaking disbelief, forlorn awe—none of which are good for Alaric. He doesn't seem to recognize any of it; he still has a smile on his face as he walks back to his mother, knife in hand. "This is for The Betrayed—for all of us."

He swings his knife up, pausing at the apex.

Isadora tilts her head back, exposing her neck. "I love you, son," she whispers.

His hand wavers but Alaric has made his decision. He slashes down. The blade hits its mark, slashing across Isadora's throat. A spray of blood splashes across the sand at her side.

The thump of her body against the ground reverberates through Serena. Instead of allowing it to push her down further, Serena thunders back. She gathers strength, forcing energy into focus. Suddenly, Kai's plan becomes very clear. She knows what she has to do.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Hunched over, Serena curls her body around her wrists. She unlocks each clamp and buries the key in the sand beneath her. Still holding tight to the chains she straightens, feigning her captivity.

Alaric faces his people. "That waste of water there," he says, pointing to Isadora's limp body, "Ceased being my mother the day she abandoned me."

No one responds. A few shake their heads.

"You should all be so lucky to have the chance to do that. I can help you. We can hunt them all down, take our vengeance."

One member steps forward.

"Colin," Alaric smiles. "I knew I could count on you. We've got to look after those boys of yours. I can help you do that."

"Alaric…" Colin shakes his head. When he stops, he holds his chin high and crosses his arms. "Hell no."

Tentative cheers ring up behind Colin, but it is not everyone. The mob goes tense because of it. Alaric's men push Colin back then prowl around the ring, ready to intercept anyone who gets violent with their own leader. Toward the rear of the warehouse, a fight breaks out in the crowd.

Frustrated, Alaric motions to his crew, including the two that have transformed into wolves. They each jump atop the ring of tires, and several move in from outside. Together, they growl in a simultaneous, deep rumble that shakes the warehouse. Everyone glances around and quiets, not willing to provoke the biggest members of the pack. The fighting in the back ceases, and Alaric gains control once again.

"We will coax those scales and tails from the sea, even if it has to be one by one," Alaric nudges his mother's limp hand with his boot. "Only one of the mermaids here can do that, but she ain't playin'." Alaric turns to both Arista and Serena.

They both stand, spines rigid and senses alert.

"Let's have a match."

Claps, whoops, and hollers rise up from a couple of the men.

"Are you kidding?" asks Arista. "After everything I've done for you?"

Alaric shrugs. "I figure I'd give you a chance to win the favor of the pack. Just make your queen sing."

"I won't do it," says Arista. "This was never part of our agreement."

Alaric steps toward her, keeping his eyes on the ground. Once they are toe to toe, he leans in. "Were you there, the night I tore into the king?" he asks, voice low.

She glances at Serena before she answers. "I saw…from a distance."

He nods, eyes fixed at a point beyond her shoulder. "Then you wouldn't have smelled the fresh blood smeared over his tattered scales. You can't have heard the tear of soft muscle from bone or seen the way the shredded meat flopped in between my fangs."

Arista swallows hard.

Now Alaric looks her in the eye. "If you don't make your queen sing, I'll give my wolves the order, and you can witness all of that first hand. Except it will be your blood smeared over scales, and your muscle tearing away from bone." Alaric steps back, smiling. "How about it, chum? You would really live up to your nickname."

Arista flinches, running the back of a shaky hand across her forehead.

Serena almost feels sorry for her; almost.

His voice raises. "There will be a victor tonight," he glances at Serena. "Or two more graves." He turns walking away and taking his place on top of the ring of tires. "Fighters, shake hands!" Alaric yells.

Arista remains still, and Serena just looks at him confused.

"Or, do it however you do it," he mumbles.

A bell rings out. Arista frowns, but performs a hesitant curtsey toward her opponent as Serena does the same. It is the same thing Zayla teaches caste mates to do during grappling class.

Immediately, Arista moves into a mock warrior stance. She raises Dagon until the trident is parallel with the ground, sitting on her shoulder. Rearing back, she releases the weapon and it flies toward Serena.

Arista isn't trained with a trident. She has angled it too high and doesn't put nearly enough power behind it. Dagon only makes it halfway in between the pair. Tips bury themselves into the ground, the stem ringing with vibration.

Serena drops her chains and runs toward the trident. Momentarily shocked at Serena's freedom, Arista's eyes go wide.

"Go!" Alaric shouts out at her.

Arista bolts into action, running for the trident too. Serena is faster and has a head start, but Dagon stands closer to Arista. Serena pushes harder, narrowing her gaze on her target. She reaches the trident first, but doesn't grasp the stem.

Realizing she lost the race, Arista digs her heels into the sand, trying to stop. It doesn't work; she slides forward directly into Serena. Reaching around Dagon, Serena grabs Arista's braid. Finding the handle of the knife buried within thick locks, Serena pulls it out. Her other hand grasps for Arista, dragging her close. It looks like a hug, with the trident between them.

"What the—?"Alaric mumbles.

The room has gone silent; everyone stares as the two maidens embrace. With her mouth right by Arista's ear, Serena whispers, "For Isadora."

Arista's eyes go wide as the small knife flashes between them.

Dipping down slightly, Serena's hand reaches around the back of Arista's legs, and the blade digs into soft skin.

Thick, crimson blood pools at their feet, mixing with the sand they stand on. Out of the corner of her eye, Serena can see Alaric look down, trepidation lighting his face. He takes a step forward.

Arista cries out in pain, and falls, her whole body shaking. Legs temporarily disabled, she scoots back from Serena with several vain attempts at standing.

Still crouching, Serena pivots on her feet. One hand shoots out and grabs Dagon as she turns. Manipulating the familiar weight, Serena releases as it spins around the back of her hand, then grasps it in a throwing position as she stands up straight.

Alaric has not had time to move; he remains still—almost stupefied.

Serena rears back then throws, twisting her hips as she releases the trident. It catches Alaric just under the rib cage. The force causes him to stumble back several feet—the men around him giving wide berth. Shuffling on the roof diverts their attention. When they look back at Serena, she is already directly in front of Alaric.

Alaric looks down at the trident, mouth hanging open.

Hands grasping the stem of the weapon, Serena pulls. Spiked barbs on the tips rip through Alaric's skin on their way out of his body. She repositions her hands.

"A king for a king," she says. "The sea will have its revenge." She jabs upward. The middle tip spears Alaric just under the chin.

With all her strength, Serena continues to push up. Alaric rises to his toes just as Undine guards jump down into the room from the roof. They position themselves around Serena, tridents and arrows at the ready.

Blood bubbles out of Alaric's slightly parted mouth, and Serena can see the glint of her golden trident inside it. His eyes roll to the back of his head. Serena steps back, lowering Dagon and Alaric to the ground. There is one last gurgle, and he slumps over, dead.

Serena retracts her trident, bringing it to her side. She finally looks up. There are only five Undine guards; including Kai. Beyond them is a room full of frenzied werewolves; and Serena has just killed their leader.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Connor steps forward. "Serena—"

He is cut off as two guards threaten him with their tridents. Everybody is too tense.

"Liam," he chokes out.

She nods. "Stand down," she orders the guards. "Did they take him?" she asks Kai without taking her eyes off Connor.

"Yes," he answers. "To Cliff Beach."

"Go," she tells Connor without hesitation. Before he makes it out of the warehouse, Serena turns to the rest of the room. "Those that hold allegiance to Liam; go seek him. Tell the Undine to release him, by order of their queen."

Almost all of the warehouse empties of people; all except Alaric's sworn crew, and a few stragglers. Serena is undecided if that many would stand behind Liam; perhaps they just needed a chance to get out of there.

At least the numbers are a little more even; Serena and her five guards against ten wolves.

Serena forces herself to take deep breaths. The wolves look at one another, trying to figure out who will take the lead.

She uses the opportunity to sidestep closer to Kai. "Sending Isadora in alone, making Alaric release Liam—that was all part of your plan, wasn't it?"

"We weren't counting on Arista…" Kai murmurs, glancing at the maiden crumpled over in the dirt. She has managed to wrap a torn shirt around her knees, stemming the bleeding. Another guard is watching her, so Kai turns to keep square with a pacing wolf in front of him.

"So now what?" Serena hisses through clenched teeth. "Where is Murphy? Where are the rest of the guards?" Serena asks.

"They had to stay back at the beach to protect—"

What wolves are left in Ungainly form drop to all fours. Their shift from skin to fur is faster than any Serena has ever seen. The combination of the full moon, and being pumped full of Liam's blood probably helps.

In response, Serena calls forth every last scale she can. Slicing through her skin, tiny shells of midnight blue cover everything from her toes to her chin.

Already armored, the guards don't have to do the same, but Kai issues a slew of orders. "Cover the hole in the left flank, aim for their soft middles or the neck. Protect the queen. No one attacks Serena and survives. I don't care whose sons they are."

Serena glances sideways at Kai. This has been the problem all along; too much violence and too much fighting. But these are Alaric's men and Serena doubts they could ever be persuaded from avenging his death.

When the first wave of wolves attack, it looks entirely coordinated. Every other one lunges for an Undine guard. Just as they leap, those remaining lunge forward, directly for Serena. They aren't playing any more games. Mostly occupied with their own fight, the guards can't do anything about the second wave.

Serena holds her ground, forcing herself to wait until the very last second. When she can practically feel the hot breath of dog against her face, Serena bends her knees and leaps. She stretches up with one hand, imagining she is in the entrance pool to the archives, aiming to scrape fingernails against the gritty ceiling.

There is a whoosh of air just underneath her toes. At the apex of her jump, Serena rotates Dagon so the tips face down. Throwing her feet up and behind her as she falls, the weapon will land first. It makes contact behind one wolf's neck, slicing through until the crescent moon that holds Dagon's spikes together hits bone.

Serena swings her feet wide, using the pinned trident like a tree branch. Kicking another wolf, Serena throws him back. She lands on her feet, and is almost instantly buried by claws and fur. One of them rips a wide gash in her upper arm but their fangs have a difficult time getting past her scales. Weight upon more weight piles on top of her, all of them squirming, trying to get their own piece. Finally, one is lifted from the pile and Serena breathes clear air. Kai's face appears, quickly followed by his hand. Serena reaches out, grasping because her life depends on it. He pulls her from the pile and into his arms while others defend them.

"We need help," she shakes, trying to hold it together. It is hard not to break down now that she's in the protection of Kai's arms. "Where are the others?"

"They won't be coming to help us, Serena," Kai says, breathing hard. "We need to make it back to them."

Another guard hands Serena her trident.

"Thank you," she says, unlatching herself from Kai to take Dagon.

"Your majesty." He bows, almost getting bowled over by a wolf.

Serena rolls her eyes. Their formality will be the death of them.

"Don't let them go!" Kai shouts.

Several wolves run out of the house. The only pack mate they have left behind quickly succumbs to deadly tridents.

"Will they go after those that took Liam?" Serena asks, panic and exhaustion both lining her voice.

"Maybe," answers Kai. "But the problem is we really didn't send him to Cliff Beach."

"What? Where is he?"

"Come on," Kai says, taking her by the elbow. "There is something you need to see."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The run to Forest Beach is quick. Serena is propelled by the rhythm of feet pounding against the ground in sync. They settle into a pace, Kai running directly beside Serena, occasionally brushing her elbow with his own. One guard is left behind to escort Arista home.

They clear the tree line without any wolf sightings.

"We'll have to move this along as quickly as we can, before they figure out we sent them in the wrong direction for Liam," Kai says in between heaving breaths.

"Move what along? And where is Liam?" She eyes a group of Undine standing in a circle further down the beach.

As Serena approaches cautiously, Kai whispers by her side, "Liam is safe; he won't be harmed. But this…" He gestures to the group in front of them. It is Murphy and the remaining guards. "It's what I was trying to tell you. They had to stay at the beach to protect Cordelia."

The line of Murphy and the guards break as they step away to reveal an Undine in deep burgundy scales hunched over in the sand. Hailey and Zayla kneel beside her, hands rubbing her back and whispering in her ears. There are a pile of crudely shaped glass panes, each with a strap for a handle. It is their bulletproof shields, and their last defense against Ungainly weapons.

Amidst the group of Undine, Cordelia looks up, a sheen of sweat covering her brow and temples. "Your majes—" her own, strangled scream cuts off her formal greeting as her body spasms with pain.

Serena steps forward, shaking her head, but she is at a loss for words.

Breathing hard, Cordelia recovers from the contraction. She licks her lips and looks up at Serena again. "My child will share a birthday with the queen."

"The contractions are very close together now," says Hailey. She isn't addressing the queen, she is mumbling in Cordelia's ear. "Soon you can begin pushing."

As if to prove her right, Cordelia moans again. "Not yet, not yet." She leans forward, touching her forehead to the sand.

"You four watch the forest," Murphy commands. "Arrows at the ready."

"The wolves won't be far behind us," announces Kai.

In the meantime, Cordelia has mounted to a full on contraction. Hailey and Zayla, the guards, and Serena all ride the wave of pain with her. Shouts of encouragement, hands massaging her back and sides; they all help her to stay on top of the crest instead of sinking beneath it.

Every muscle in Serena's body tenses, and she can feel a sheen of sweat on her own forehead.

Kai puts his hand on her shoulder, and Serena turns into him. They embrace, squeezing each other tighter as they listen to Cordelia's cries.

"I feel so helpless," Serena mumbles into his chest.

He strokes Serena's long, wavy hair, and her bioluminescence subsides. "Poseidon won't give her anything she can't handle," Kai reassures Serena.

"Okay, next contraction," Hailey says. "You must begin to push."

Serena peeks out from Kai's arms. Cordelia is nodding, but tears streak down her cheeks and her whole body shakes. If Poseidon were here, Serena would strangle him on the spot.

"You can do this," Zayla coaches Cordelia. "You are going to be a mother—and then the real work begins."

Cordelia manages to squeak out a laugh.

Shouts from the guards rise up.

"Hail the maiden warrior!"

"To the survival of the Undine race!"

"For Ervin!"

The last shout is from Kai, and it draws only silence. Ervin…Cordelia's mate, the father, Serena's best friend, and a warrior killed during the King's Massacre.

Using Hailey and Zayla for support, Cordelia draws strength from Kai's words, and stands. "For Ervin," she agrees.

She throws her head back, raising her chin to the moon and shrieks as the pain comes back. Her screams echo down the beach, carried across the sea. They are answered by a chorus of howls emerging from the forest. Serena, Kai, and the rest of the guards each grab a shield and turn to face the dark. Shadows creep out, and they have claws and teeth.

The shield will do no good against werewolves, and Serena doubts any will carry a pistol while running on all fours. Serena recognizes those they just fought, some with wounds from the struggle. They snarl and bare

fangs. More wolves creep out from the trees until the Undine are surrounded on the beach. Almost everyone that was in the warehouse is here now.

Serena's grip tightens on Dagon as she holds it at the ready, and the defenders behind her follow suit. The ocean, their only retreat, is at their backs, but they can't leave until Cordelia has safely given birth.

More wolves emerge, panting hard from the fight and from the run over. Connor, Doug, Zeke, and Colin, recognizable from torn bits of clothing hanging off their backs; they are all in their work shirts. They too bare their teeth, standing shoulder to shoulder with Alaric's crew.

Serena's breath leaves her body in sharp bursts.

What went wrong? Did they still have allegiance to Alaric?

Her eyes hop from one wolf to another. *Liam would really come in handy right about now.*

"Hold!" she orders her guards. They lean forward, dropping the shields, ready to attack and willing to give their lives for the weak maiden behind them. Her moans and screams, and the hushed encouragement from Hailey and Zayla, only strengthen their resolve.

Finally, Connor steps forward to stand in front of the pack. Once he does, he surveys the Undine before him, all pointing their tridents at his pack mates. There are more moans behind Serena, and Connor lifts his snout, sniffing the air.

Telling herself to trust her twin brother's closest friend, Serena lowers Dagon and steps to the side, revealing Cordelia in the sand behind her.

Connor's ears perk and he paws the sand, giving a short whine.

"What is your decision, Connor of Clan Werich?" asks Serena.

The wolf takes two steps forward. Serena can feel the guards tense beside her. She puts her hand on Kai's arm, staving him off. She is still determined to trust Connor, despite the hundreds of teeth bared at her and her kinsmen.

Connor glances one last time at Serena, then turns to face his clan. He grows taller, raising his chin slightly and staring down the brothers in front of them. A few step forward and turn as well. Doug is the first, followed by Colin and Zeke. Like a slow rolling wave, wolves step forward down the line then turn. There are finally just a few remaining facing the Undine, mainly Alaric's crew.

They growl and do not move. A few sharp barks from Connor, and Alaric's crew reluctantly bend their front legs, pressing their snouts into the sand as they kneel.

Serena waves her hand at the Undine guards until they lower their tridents. The entire clan of werewolves, Connor included, now turn to face Serena and kneel, muzzles on the ground.

"You killed Alaric," Kai whispers by her side. "You are their queen now, too."

"Werewolves don't have queens," says Serena, swallowing hard. "They have an alpha…"

Behind her, out of the middle of the circle of Undine Guards, Serena hears Cordelia cry out. "Something's wrong!"

Serena and the two wolves stop, turning their heads to the circle. The guards shift on their feet, but do not chance a peek behind them.

"Deep breaths, dear. The pain will—"

Another screech from Cordelia cuts Hailey short. The laboring mother sits straight up, grabbing her midsection.

On hands and knees beside Cordelia, Hailey's deft hands push and prod into her midsection. "The calfling is breach," says Hailey.

"Colin," Serena says sharply.

Beside her, his ears perk.

"Get Darcy."

Colin turns with a brusque bark and runs in the direction of the trailer park. The rest of the pack who is clumped together further down the beach watch with peaked interested.

"Cordelia," Hailey is whispering but silence has fallen over the beach. Even the waves dare not come too close. "I have to turn the calfling so it can come through unharmed. This is going to hurt."

"Okay," Cordelia nods. She is in between contractions. "Please, just be quick."

Behind Serena, Connor angles closer. She turns to face him. As one of the larger werewolves, Connor's muzzle almost reaches Serena's shoulders.

He looks pointedly at each of the Undine guards, then back to Serena. Serena gets his meaning. *Each of the Undine is here and safe. Where is ours? Where is Liam?*

"What's wrong?" Kai asks Serena, coming to stand by her side without taking his eyes off Connor.

"They want to know where Liam is."

"Oh…" Kai's head shoots back to Connor, and his mouth snaps shut.

Connor is still, fixing Kai with a hard stare. It is not quite aggressive, just…attentive.

"Well?" asks Serena.

"Well what?" Kai looks back at her.

"Where is he?"

Eyebrows knit together under small lines in his forehead, and his hand squeezes her upper arm. "I told you, Serena. He's safe."

Serena steps back from Kai, planting the stem of her trident in the sand. "So go get him."

Kai clears his throat, but it comes out sounding strangled. By now Serena has turned to square off with Kai, with Connor standing by her side.

He pauses, glancing between her and Connor. "What's happening here?"

"What is happening is I'm asking you to go get Liam and bring him to the beach."

Kai's shoulders sag. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I cannot do it."

Serena isn't sure if she worries more because the lines grow deeper in his forehead or because of his formal tone. "Why not?"

"Because," Kai stands up straight, his eyes drifting back to Connor. "He refuses to come."

Chapter Forty

"Why?" Serena is trying not to shout, and trying not to disturb Cordelia, but the men in her life are making that difficult.

"That," Kai says, shrugging his shoulders, "is between you and him."

A jumble of angry words fly from Serena's mouth, none of which make sense, even to her own ears.

"Serena," Kai hisses. "Maintain your bearing…"

She takes a deep breath, embarrassed to be portraying such a temper in front of her subjects; both old and new. Swallowing her pride, she turns to Connor.

"Liam will be returned to your clan, unharmed. I'm not sure why he would choose now of all times to…not be here."

An extra loud moan from the center of the circle cuts Serena off. "Although…"

Connor flips his tail once, blinks, then returns to the pack standing not too far off.

"And that means…?" prods Kai.

"It means he has accepted my answer—for now. But I'm not sure he is happy about it." She turns to Kai. "And I am definitely not—"

"Serena?" Darcy bursts from the tree line, running toward the group. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, thank Poseidon—Darcy! Yes, I'm fine."

"Colin came and got me; wouldn't let me leave the trailer without my medical kit," Darcy holds up a small bag. "Is someone hurt?"

"Here," Serena escorts her to the circle.

Two guards step aside to the let the women pass, but the wolf that accompanies Darcy stays on her heels.

Tridents block the opening in front of the wolf, slicing together in front of his snout. He yelps, jumping back. Crouching, the hairs on the back of his neck perk as he bares his teeth.

Darcy turns to one of the guards. "May I introduce you to Colin, my husband."

The guards exchange a glance. How could they possibly allow a werewolf direct access to a birthing maiden?

Serena steps in between the guards, pushing their tridents back to their sides. "Colin wishes no harm to the calfling or Cordelia; he only wants to remain by his wife's side."

There is no change in posture, and no movements from their guards.

Serena sighs. "Would you allow your mate unescorted inside a circle of werewolves? On the full moon, no less?"

This elicits a raised eyebrow from one of them, and it is enough for Serena. "Come on then, Colin." She stays between the guards until the wolf has passed through. Once they are both inside the guards close the circle behind them.

"The baby is breach?" Darcy asks after one quick look at Hailey's kneading.

"The calfling is, yes," says, Zayla, falling right back in her Caste Master tone.

Darcy either does not notice, or does not care. She falls to her knees on the other side of Cordelia. "No, no, that is too rough."

Covered in a sheen of sweat, Hailey sits back on her heals. "And I suppose you've done this before?"

"Twice," answers Darcy without looking up. "On myself."

Hailey glances at the werewolf standing alert beside Darcy.

"But it goes much easier with help," Darcy continues. "You press down and to the side from the top, here. Gentle because that is the baby's head."

"Calfling," Hailey mumbles.

Darcy pauses, looking up. "Do you want this baby and the mother to survive this?"

Hailey's lips press together tight, but she gives a curt nod.

"Then I suggest we don't argue about what to call it, and focus on birthing it. Now press here."

Hailey hesitates. Serena has never known Hailey to be stubborn, but then again she has never seen Hailey with an Ungainly.

Cordelia moans again. "Please, Hailey, just make the pain stop…"

This time, Hailey doesn't hesitate. She touches the side of Cordelia's hot, red cheek with her cool palm. "As you say." Both of her hands move to the topside of Cordelia's swollen midsection, and begin pressing down.

Toward the bottom, Darcy is working. They alternate between kneading and twisting, with Hailey mimicking Darcy's moves. Cordelia has gone silent. Serena watches the women work, their hands falling in time with the sound of the waves. A wave comes ashore; knead. A wave recedes; twist.

The small lump under Cordelia's skin shifts.

"There!" cries Darcy. "Now hopefully it won't revert back."

Serena stands as solid as a rock against the tide, but she breathes a sigh of relief.

"What's wrong with her?" Hailey looks at Cordelia. The maiden's eyes are shut and she isn't moving.

Darcy checks the pulse at her neck. "Just asleep—she is exhausted. It won't last for long, though. We need to get this baby—" Darcy cuts herself off, looking at Hailey. "This calfling…out on her next contraction."

Half a smile touches Hailey's lips. She reaches out to lay a hand on top of Darcy's. Both over Cordelia's swollen stomach. "Thank you," Hailey whispers. "For helping."

Cordelia's eyes flutter open.

"It's time to push your other calfling out, Cordelia," Hailey coaxes as her hands break apart from Darcy's, ready to work.

Cordelia shakes her head, but no tears come. She is all out of tears. Glancing up at the werewolf looming and panting over the group, Cordelia doesn't even flinch. "Who is this?"

"This is my husband, Colin," says Darcy, addressing Cordelia for the first time. "He is just here to make sure I'm okay."

Cordelia glances at the circle of Undine guards surrounding her, eyes running over their backs, assessing the situation. Her gaze stops back on Colin. "He's very…" she pauses, perhaps searching for the right word. "Impressive."

Darcy laughs out loud. "Yes, he tends to think so."

Colin pushes his snout into Darcy's shoulder, nudging her.

"Is the pain gone, Cordelia?" asks Hailey.

"Yes," Cordelia says. "I cannot feel anything anymore."

Hailey and Darcy exchange a glance. Each of them know that isn't a good sign.

"If…" begins Cordelia, pausing to squeeze her eyes shut. "If I don't make it and the calfling is male…"

Hailey's hand goes to Cordelia's forehead, smoothing back hair.

"If he is dying, give him the potion." She opens her eyes to look at Darcy and Colin. "I want you to take care of him, please."

Serena moves closer, as does Hailey with the bundled calfling still in her arms, closing a tight inner circle around Cordelia.

"What potion…?" Darcy's question trails off as she watches Zayla remove a small vial of yellow liquid from the dry pouch at her waist and slip it to Hailey.

"But he won't grow up like," Cordelia continues, glancing at Serena. "Well, he will know his people. You are all going to just have to stop killing each other."

"It will be done, Cordelia," Serena says. "I swear it."

"Honey," Darcy is feeling the bottom of her abdomen. "You are contracting."

"Really?" asks Cordelia. "I don't feel it—it's nice." Her head flops to one side and her eyes close.

"You have to push now, Cordelia," urges Hailey.

"I'm just so tired," Cordelia mumbles.

"I know—just one more, one more for your calfling."

Encouragement from Hailey and Darcy build with the incoming wave. Serena watches Cordelia's hands digging into the sand, but it provides no sturdy hold for her. Granules slide from her grasp as water rushes toward the group. Cordelia pushes. There are no grunts of labor, no moans of pain. There are no whimpers and no sobs. It is a silent suffering.

The tide has come in and the water reaches the group, skimming over the sand, surrounding Cordelia. A small calfling glides into the world. The water recedes, bringing with it the blood from the birth.

Colin rips his already torn bowling alley shirt off his back and nudges Darcy. Taking the material out of his fangs, Darcy and Hailey work to wrap the calfling in a tight bundle.

But Serena isn't watching the calfling, she is watching its mother close her eyes for the last time. She watches Cordelia's chest perform one last rise with breath, and Serena watches a friend die.

Amidst Undine guards and werewolf soldiers, Hailey holds the newest calfling in one arm, and the vial of yellow liquid in another. "It's a boy," she announces.

Chapter Forty-One

Serena glances at the tiny bundle, then falls on her knees next to Cordelia's side. "Cordelia…" she murmurs, running fingertips over her limp hand. "Cordelia!" she yells.

Ervin, Sasha Sunbeam, her father, and Isadora. Too many have passed into the afterlife; Serena cannot allow another. Not this one. There is so much work to do.

"Cordelia!" she yells again, shaking the maiden's shoulders. Tears blur her eyes, and with the watery view it is as if Cordelia is already sinking into The Deep to be burned in the ceremonial fires.

"There is a better way," Darcy says. She scoots Serena aside, places her hands on Cordelia's chest, and begins pumping with the heal of her hand. Her eyebrows furrow, and she stops to feel around. "Her lungs—they aren't quite like ours. Where is her sternum?"

Serena wipes at her cheeks. "What is a sternum?"

Darcy gives Serena an exasperated look, but doesn't answer. She starts pumping again. "Come on, Cordelia."

Her limp body jolts each time Darcy presses down.

"Your majesty…" Zayla whispers.

Serena doesn't answer, she is mesmerized by the rhythmic pumping of Darcy's hands.

"Serena!" Zayla hisses this time.

Snapping her eyes up, Serena rubs the rest of the blurry tears from her eyes.

"Cordelia will be with Ervin, by now."

Nodding, Serena lays a hand on Darcy's shoulder. "That is enough, let her rest."

Darcy rocks back on her heals. "I still might be able to…" her voice cracks, and she doesn't finish the sentence.

Around the circle of maidens, the guards turn. They bend to one knee and bow their heads, giving their final respects to the fallen maiden. Behind them, Serena can see that pack of wolves have come closer. They begin to change back to their Ungainly forms. Hair falls from their bodies,

and they lift themselves to sturdy feet. With the passing of Cordelia there is no longer fear permeating the air, allowing them take control of their wolves and change back.

One of the first to his feet briefly disappears into the forest and returns with a bundle of capes and blankets. The clan covers themselves and two are passed through the circle of guards; one for Colin, who has already shifted, and one for Cordelia.

Darcy covers the maiden's body from the neck down, taking care to smooth out the wrinkles and folds.

"Leave her," Hailey says, her words brusque. "We've got another problem. This little one isn't doing so well." She bends, laying the small bundle down in the sand.

He is only half the size he should be. A pasty white chest barely rises, and a quiet whistling noise escapes from his mouth.

"It's like his lungs aren't fully developed," whispers Darcy. She runs the pad of her finger across his tiny palm. It doesn't react. "And his reflexes aren't right, either."

"Serena," says Hailey. "With his mother and father both dead, decisions for care of the calfling falls to the Queen."

"What do you mean?" asks Serena.

"She means," says Zayla. "You must decide whether or not to give him the potion."

"You are going to change him into one of us? After all this?" Colin speaks up. "You've seen how we live, abandoned by our parents. Don't abandon this one, too."

Serena shakes her head. "His parents are already gone…"

"I don't think this is what Liam would want," Colin tries again. There are murmurs from the clan outside of the circle. Some agree, but others aren't so sure.

The guards get to their feet, half of them turning to face the pack. They do not break their circle.

Serena finally meets Colin's gaze. "Right now, I will consider what Cordelia would want above all else. And she has already told us of her wishes."

Darcy lays a gentle hand on Colin's arm, "She asked us to care for him."

Colin's forehead crinkles. "Of course, but… can't we just wait a little longer—see if he improves overnight?"

Darcy shakes her head. "Honey, I'm not sure he would survive the night, much less the next hour."

Serena looks at Hailey, still holding the vial. Finally, Serena closes her eyes and nods. She can hear Hailey pop the cork off the top.

"Lift his head a little," she instructs Darcy.

"Wait!" says Serena, eyes flying open to see the vial at the calfling's lips. "I will name him first—while he is still Undine."

Hailey nods, pulling the vial away.

Serena takes a deep breath and looks down at the calfling, laying a hand on his chest. He wriggles slightly. "I name you for your father, Ervin. Your name has been chosen with love and with strength of heritage. May you do your parents and your people proud. We will be watching over you, Ervin." Serena wraps him back up in the blanket, swaddling him tight, and hands him to Darcy. "He will have your last name. A blend of both worlds."

Colin moves to stand by her side, embracing both his wife and the baby.

"Here," Hailey hands the open vial to Darcy. "It should be you."

Darcy glances up at her husband, eyes glistening with tears for the first time tonight. He nods, and Darcy takes the vial from Hailey.

Kai moves into the circle, wrapping his hands around Serena's shoulders. She leans into him for support. Hailey and Zayla, the circle of guards, and Clan Werich behind them all watch as Darcy tips the vial into the calfling's mouth, and the yellow liquid disappears in between his lips.

The Taking, Book Three

Eternity begins and ends with the ocean's tides. - Unknown

Chapter One

"Aiden, you are too far out…" The anxious mother's words are drowned out by the next wave. Aiden ignores her anyway. The ocean is rarely warm enough for swimming, and he is going to take full advantage today.

Scanning the water for light-brown tufts of hair, Aiden spots his younger brothers. Both are with a group of human children, throwing a Frisbee back and forth in the shallow surf.

"Aiden!" his mother yells again.

He turns his back to the shore and moves deeper, past the breakers until the swells breach his shoulders. Shuffling through the sand, Aiden stubs his big toe. "Ouch!" He hops a few times on his other foot while he kneads at the stinging pain with his fingers.

Taking a deep breath, he plunges his head underneath the surface. The sensitive senses of smell and hearing dull, allowing Aiden to focus on the sharpened underwater images. Streams of sunlight penetrating the surface send crisscrossed patterns dancing across the sandy ocean floor. A clump of rocks host sea-green coral reaching its spiny limbs toward the light. Yellow-striped fish dart in and out of the plant-like organisms. Gentle tides nuzzle against the boy as he takes a moment to revel in their security.

His fingertips locate the hard object and begin to dig. A quick hiatus to take a breath, and back under he goes, quickly uncovering something round and smooth.

Already short on air again, Aiden wraps his hand around the object. There are convenient finger holds on the other side. He gives it one mighty tug on his way up for air, and it springs free.

He breaks through the surface gasping for breath. Aiden holds the object to the failing light. An off-white sphere, sanded smooth by rough currents rests in his hands. Aiden turns it to see the holes his fingers have breached. They are eye sockets.

Aiden almost drops the skull in shock. There is a large nose cavity; the kind that might hold an elongated snout. But that isn't the most obvious clue that this skull belongs to one of his kind. Two needle-sharp fangs emerge from the upper jaw. Though the waves push and pull at his weight, Aiden stands still, mesmerized by the artifact in his hands. Running the pad of his thumb the length of one fang, he jumps as he feels a hand close over his shoulder in a painful squeeze. The fang slices him.

"Ow!" Blood seeps from his thumb, and he drops the skull as if it came to life and bit him. The discovery splashes back into the water, spraying icy cold water onto Aiden and his mother behind him, who still has her hand on his shoulder.

"Mom—" but Aiden cuts off at the burning sensation that fireballs out from his thumb, up his arm, and straight into his chest. The minor injury paired with his adrenaline rush set off a hormonal reaction; one that Aiden has yet to learn to control.

"Not again…" He throws his head back in pain. "Make it stop mom, please!"

She wraps her body around her son, as if she can forcefully keep the wolf from emerging. But it doesn't help. Spiky, brown hairs spear out from under his skin like needles, and his swimsuit is already ripping at the seams.

Desperate, she looks toward her other sons. They already realize what is happening, and have created a distraction further up the beach by fighting. As they exchange meaningless blows, the only kind a five and seven-year-old can deal out, beachgoers point and whisper at the spectacle.

The mother does the only thing she can do. She moves both further down the shore and deeper into the water, away from the humans. They try to stay hidden behind ocean swells. It isn't difficult; Aiden is buckling at the knees.

Cooler water licks at their feet, and before the mother realizes what is happening, they are moving further and further out to sea, caught in a current. Aiden bends violently at the waist, his head going underwater. Neither of their feet touch the ocean floor, and she kicks, trying bring his head back up.

Once he does, the mother's heart sinks. Her son has fully transformed, and werewolves can't swim.

"Paddle, Aiden!" she encourages.

But he can't even manage to keep his ears above the surface, and his body is now far too large for her to hold up while treading water.

Small ripples nudge at the mother's shoulders. She turns in a full circle, eyes growing wide as she realizes the disturbance is coming at them from every direction.

At first it isn't obvious, but the creatures soon reveal themselves. There is a flick of a light-brown fin, a scaled hand slicing through the air, and then curious eyes emerge.

The mother does the only thing she can. She pleads to the very reason the skull lies buried in the ocean in the first place.

"Help us… please!"

Chapter Two

"Why are you being so difficult?" Serena stands underneath swaths of sunlight streaming down through open holes in the ceiling, bathing the archives in brightness. Her spine is as rigid as Dagon, the trident she holds. She is a stark contrast to her twin brother, who is hunched over an open book.

His lanky arms lope over the table while his feet splay open underneath. "I'm not bein' difficult. I'm bein' reasonable." He lifts an eyebrow, but doesn't glance up from the pages crinkled yellow with age.

"As you say," Serena huffs. It is on the verge of a snort. She watches as he scratches underneath the metal collar hugging his neck. "At least let me remove that thing for you," she says, stepping forward and lowering the tips of her trident.

"No." Now he looks at her, eyes hard and jaw clenching.

"It could kill you, Liam!" She raises her voice.

Liam stands suddenly, sending his chair tipping behind him. Three steps and he is towering over her. "It stays because it protects you!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Serena can see two large figures emerge from corner shadows. The Queen's Guard.

"Stand down, werewolf," says Morven, the largest of all the Queen's Guard.

Serena glances at the guard, then back to Liam. "I have plenty of protection." She lowers her trident, the shadow of the tips floating across her face.

Liam doesn't turn to face Morven. Instead, he closes his eyes. Underneath the stubble on his chin and cheeks, red creeps up from his neck. Serena waits while he takes three deep breaths, and the usual dark creamy beige replaces the red.

"You have more colors than The Painted Maidens, brother," Serena says.

He lifts one corner of his mouth in a half-smile. "Well it's about time someone adds some flavor to this rigid place."

Serena relaxes her shoulders in response, trying not to admit to herself it is mostly forced.

"Listen, Serena," Liam says, his eyes boring into her. "I know you want me to return home—but the pack needs to learn to trust you as their queen, and be ready to follow you. That won't happen if they are constantly lookin' to me. Give them more time."

"They think I hold you against your will; despite the letters you've written. They need more proof."

Liam shrugs. "You gave them Arista as collateral, didn't you?"

"I don't think they see her as collateral," says Serena. "Undine know her as a traitor and the werewolves know her as one of Alaric's lackeys. She's just…trouble."

Sighing, Liam returns to the table, pushes his chair upright, and sits. He toys with the hard corners of the book while the guards retreat back into the shadows. "Let them visit me, then."

Serena can almost feel the tension in the room stretching as tight as the chain that runs from a dropped anchor to its ship. Allow more werewolves to enter Undine territory? If there were another betrayal the Undine would have nowhere to run.

Serena remains silent.

"Okay…" Liam glances at the guards. "Maybe only a few?"

Considering, Serena glanced at the enlarged skylight hanging over the catalogues; the very same one used to throw Liam into the archives a month ago. He has been here ever since, catching up on his Undine reading.

At the time, it was the only place Kai could think of to hold Liam. The archives don't connect with any other Undine caves, and though Serena knows Liam wouldn't harm an Undine, she doesn't think anyone else truly believes that.

"I will confer with my council," Serena finally nods.

"Conferrin', conferrin'," Liam mumbles. "You all are always conferrin'. Why not just make a decision and freakin' get something done?"

Serena patiently folds her hands in front of her. "Are you telling me how to run my kingdom, Liam?"

He runs his palm over tired eyes. "No."

"Then are you telling me how to run *your* kingdom?"

Glancing at her, he doesn't answer.

"Because you are free to leave here at any time and take the clan as yours."

Now he bends all the way forward, dropping his forehead against the table. "This is getting' old, Serena…"

"Tell me about it," she answers, turning her back on her twin brother.

"Your majesty!" Kai runs in from the archive entrance pool, scales that cover his body dripping wet. He isn't wearing the robe required in the archives.

Mariam, the Records Keeper, is not there but Serena stands ready to fill in the appropriate berating. Serena's relationship with Kai makes no difference when book preservation is at stake.

Before she can speak, words spill from Kai's mouth. "There was an incident with one of the boys. Darcy and her boys were attempting an integration mission on the beach, and Aiden shifted."

"When?" Serena and Liam ask simultaneously.

Liam jumps back up from his seat, sending the chair tipping once again.

Kai looks from Serena to Liam, then back again, as if he is unsure whom he should address. "A few minutes ago—"

"In broad daylight?" Serena asks, her fingertips going to her temples.

"Please tell me no humans saw." Liam steps around his sister.

Kai shrugs helplessly. "The beach was fairly crowded. They think something spooked him."

"Probably one of you," Liam's voice rises.

"Okay, everybody just stand down," Serena steps in between the two holding up the palms of her hands as if she might have to physically push them apart. She looks from one to the other until she is sure neither will become uncivil. "Where is the boy now?"

"He is no longer really a boy," says Kai. "And he has been taken out to sea."

"Are you mad?" Eyes bulging, Liam looks as though he is about to strangle Kai. "We can't swim—he'll drown, especially in werewolf form."

Unperturbed, Kai shrugs again. "His mother asked for our help, and we have managed to keep him alive. We tied the bulletproof shields together. With a little help from underneath, it is floating. We'll keep him there until he changes back and it is safe to bring him in, but… "

"What?" asks Serena.

"He is having a little trouble doing that. Not even his mother can convince him."

Liam shakes his head. "It's not a matter of convincin' him. He needs another one of us; his mother is a human. Every other time, it was his father that brought him back."

"Well, there's another problem – finding his father might not be the best choice." Kai glances up at the skylight just as it darkens. "A storm is moving in—and fast."

Chapter Three

Thunder rumbles in the distance, shaking the archives to the core.

Serena snaps her head around to Liam. "There is only one werewolf we can get to in time."

The guards are already stepping forward, their tridents by their sides. "We cannot release him—Murphy's orders."

Liam turns to face the guards. "Are you tellin' the queen how to run her kingdom?"

Serena has to hide her smile.

Morven frowns. "Murphy is the Head of the Queen's Guard—we would be reprimanded, or worse, if we let you go."

"I will be sure Murphy knows you have my pardon," Serena says.

Before the guard can answer, Liam snatches the trident out of Morven's hand. Serena moves quickly, stepping in front of the other guard to keep him from retaliating. Leaning his head to the side, Liam stretches out his neck and slides one prong of the trident underneath his collar. He twists the trident until another prong rests against his cheek. Serena exchanges glances with Kai while keeping one hand in the air, signaling to the guards to remain still.

Using his own face as leverage, Liam squeezes his eyes shut and grunts as he twists the trident. Just as Serena thinks his cheekbone is about to cave, the collar pops off. It sails through the air and bounces on the ground twice before coming to rest at Morven's feet. Without taking his eyes from Liam, the guard slowly bends and picks up the collar.

"Get that fixed while I'm gone," Liam says.

Morven looks to Serena for confirmation.

She nods. "Take it to Ronan."

"As you say, your majesty." Both guards bends at the waist, performing a short bow, then proceed to the archives entrance pool.

Serena looks to Kai. "The quickest way to the boy?"

"With *him*?" He arches his eyebrow at Liam. "Probably up to the Dry and then out to sea."

"Too risky." Serena shakes her head. "We can't let him be seen by the pack and then whisk him away again; they wouldn't let him go without a

fight."

"Not sure he'd fit in the passageway," counters Kai. "Then we'd risk him getting stuck and drowning. Not the best way to win over the hearts of the pack, either."

At an impasse, they both look to Liam for the decision. He stops rubbing the red marks on his cheek and neck to look up at the widened skylight.

"I'm not fallin' through that thing again," he says, turning to the entrance pool where the guards just disappeared. "Let's go for a swim."

"Liam, wait—we have to plan this out." Serena walks quickly to catch up with him.

Already almost to the entrance pool, Liam shakes his head. "No conferrin' on this one, Serena. We're out of time."

Another rumble of thunder shakes the archives.

She looks to Kai, eyebrows raised in a desperate plea.

"Sorry – but he's at least right about one thing," Kai says, stepping up to edge of the water. The icy cold laps at their toes. "Werewolves can't swim."

"And so how does this route make sense?" Serena glowers at Kai and Liam both.

"I don't think—"

Kai's mouth drops open as Liam hurls his massive body forward. His splash into the water is less than graceful; it is a belly flop.

Kai laughs. "I like him!"

"Kai…" Serena grumbles, taking off her robe.

Before the material floats to the ground, Kai has leapt into the air. At the apex of his jump, he bends at the waist in a pike, and dives into the water. Serena pauses to watch. Body tight and his back slightly arched, Kai's biceps squeeze his ears. The splash is barely noticeable amidst the swells that still undulate from Liam's entrance.

"Show off," Serena mumbles before jumping in herself.

Underneath the surface, Kai has already found Liam. Serena pauses above them while she melds her legs into fins. Kai is flapping his own fins in front of Liam's face. Liam swats them away, and a myriad of bubbles escape Serena's lips as she laughs.

Insistent, Kai swims in a circle then places his fins back in front of Liam. Finally catching on, Liam frowns but reaches out to wrap his thick

arms around Kai's tail. Testing the grip, Kai zigzags around the entrance pool. Finally, he angles up, performing a loop around Serena flaunting his haul. She spins, watching her brother being towed around at Kai's mercy. Kai flicks his tail toward the surface, allowing Liam to take one big breath before the pair angles for the passageway with Serena following directly behind.

Darkness squeezes in around them. The smiles are gone from each of their faces; it is time to concentrate. Serena and Kai are familiar with the necessary dance to get through the narrow corridor unscathed, but Liam is not. She does her best to help Liam from behind. Grabbing hold of his feet, she pulls one up so he turns on his side – better for angling wide shoulders through a tight spot. Next she pushes straight forward, helping the trio pick up speed for the hairpin curve ahead. If they take it quickly enough momentum will carry them through the rotation. It works; Serena has felt only minor vibrations through Liam's body as he grazes the rocky walls.

Pressure decreases as the path ascends the underwater mountain. If it is low tide, there will be a small air pocket just ahead for Liam to catch a breath. If not, it will be a hurried ride out the rest of the way. Serena crosses her fingers, hoping to feel the chain of bodies slow because Kai has found air.

The area brightens a bit, and Serena looks up to see Kai stretching out his chin. It disappears above the water.

Thank Poseidon, thinks Serena.

Serena surfaces on the other side of Liam, squashing him in between herself and Kai in the small air pocket. It is the same place Kai and Serena usually stop to sneak in an unobserved kiss.

"Remember this?" Kai asks, leaning around Liam to wink at Serena.

Her cheeks grow hot despite the icy water.

Liam groans. "I don't even want to know."

"Oh come on," Kai smiles at Liam. "You've been learning about us by reading those books for a month now. The only real way to learn is to live it… by—swimming it."

Liam rolls his eyes. "Let's just get out of here. I feel like a mermaid sandwich."

"We're halfway by now," says Serena. "But even after we get out of the tunnel there will be a bit of swim to the surface. You good?"

Liam nods. "I can go faster—we need to beat that storm."

"As you say." Serena smiles. *This is going to be fun.*

Kai disappears first, sinking below the water.

Liam turns to face Serena. "Why are you smiling?"

But she doesn't have time to answer. Liam is pulled underneath, managing to grab one last breath before he vanishes.

Serena stills her fins and allows herself to sink. In the dark, she finds Liam's feet just as he moves forward. They traverse the tunnels again. Liam doesn't kick; it is much faster to allow Kai and Serena to do the swimming for him. Gradually picking up speed, the three of them make almost effortless progress, twisting and turning, manipulating their bodies to fit the thin molds of the passageway. They make good time until Liam stops short. Serena runs straight into the back of him.

Frantic, she feels around. His midsection is lodged in a tight spot. She tries pushing at him and can feel his body jerk from Kai tugging at the other side of the jam. Serena sends out a signal. Short, short, long. It only takes one repeat for Kai to understand. They coordinate pushing and pulling at the same time on each of Serena's long signals.

They are making progress, but not quick enough. Every moment underwater Liam loses more air.

Suddenly, Liam kicks back hard, slamming Serena against the wall. The underwater clunk is echoed by several more. Liam is pounding at the walls with his fists.

That is never going to work, thinks Serena. Panic rises in her throat. She lunges forward, trying to grab at Liam's ankles, hoping to pull him back the way they came.

But she is kicked away again.

More clunks and finally the hard walls give way. Pieces of rock tumble down the side in a kaleidoscope of pings. Liam is free.

With a rigid tail, Serena pushes against the wall behind her straight into Liam. They move quicker than before, desperation fueling their fins. Breaking through the last part of the tunnel, they barrel into the open ocean. Serena moves up and Kai falls back slightly, each taking Liam under an arm.

Shepherding him to the brightest sunlight, Serena refuses to look at her brother. She doesn't want to know if he isn't breathing—not yet.

When they break the surface, she hears one large gasp right next to her ear, and she sighs in relief.

"You!" Serena lashes out at Kai. "Pulling him under before he was ready. Quit playing games. He could've died!"

"Me!" Kai's mouth drops open. "I saw the look on your face. You were having just as much fun – until things went wrong."

"He is my brother. If anything happens to him—"

"Serena," Kai interrupts. He glances at the water next to her.

Liam is no longer there. Gasping, Serena plunges one hand underneath, latching onto soggy material and pulling up again.

Taking another deep breath, Liam attempts to doggy paddle. It only results in him going back under. Kai moves in, helping Serena hold Liam up.

"Stop moving," she coaxes. "Take a deep breath, and hold it in. The air in your lungs is enough to keep you afloat."

He nods, the panic evident in his eyes. Water splashes against their faces, making it hard to inhale pure oxygen. Liam sputters and coughs, then tries again. Once his limbs go still, Serena and Kai slowly back away. Liam floats. His face turns red from holding in his breath. When he releases his air, his body almost automatically begins to sink. Quickly, he takes another breath in and bobs up until his shoulders breach the surface.

Satisfied he won't drown if she looks away again, Serena scans the ocean. For the first time, she realizes it is rolling and pitching with the oncoming storm. The birds have already left the skies as dark clouds move in.

"This is no ordinary storm," Serena says.

"For this time of the year," says Kai. "I think it is."

"Graveyard of the Pacific," says Liam, breathing out hard before he sucks in another deep breath.

Serena looks at him in question.

"It's what the humans call this area," he explains. "Because of the shipwrecks."

"Well, come on," says Kai. "Before we add to that graveyard."

Chapter Four

"Almost there," Kai coaxes Liam. All three are breathing hard, trying to guide Liam through the rough seas. It seems as though they are under water more often than they are above. The wind grows more fierce.

"I'm cramping up." Liam reverts to doggy paddling again as one leg goes stiff.

"Work through it, work through it!" Kai shouts. "Keep that air in your lungs!"

But the more Kai coaches Liam, the more Liam resists the help. His other leg begins to cramp.

Suddenly burdened with more weight, Kai and Serena find themselves under the surface in order to keep Liam's chin above.

Kai shoots Serena a glare.

Like this is all my fault?! She glares right back.

She can imagine all the arguments he can't speak out loud. *He's your brother. You are the queen. Think of something. Do something.*

Still holding Dagon in one hand, she pokes the stem out toward Kai's tail and draws circles until his tail and the trident are intertwined. Using her hip as leverage she yanks the bottom of the trident back. Following his own fins, Kai disappears into The Deep.

A smile of satisfaction lights Serena's face until her brother sinks to her depth, struggling to keep afloat. Wrapping her arm around his waist, she swims, determined to take care of her own.

Once they both breach the surface, she delivers the same scowl she gave Kai. "Sometimes I wonder how we could possibly have the same parents."

Continuing their labored swim, Kai appears a few moments later. Without a word, and without risking a single glance at Serena, he takes his place on Liam's other side.

Glad to have the help, neither Serena nor Liam protest. Besides, Kai is silent now, which seems to work better.

"There they are!" Serena spots the wolf cub on the platform as they crest a wave. He is surrounded by mermaids holding up the flat panes from underneath.

New energy surges through the trio and they ride the back of the wave down.

"Hold your breath, Liam," Serena says.

After he sucks in air, she and Kai dip below, dragging Liam with them. The swim under will be faster. They lunge forward, aiming for shimmering colors of scales.

Before she has to worry about Liam's lungs, they surface on one side of the panes.

"Darcy… " Serena spots the pup's mother. She makes sure Liam has a good hold on the panes, then swims to the other side to meet the only human out there. "Are you okay?"

Darcy's lower lip quivers. She tries to speak but presses her lips shut again, a high-pitch sob barely escaping. When she makes a second attempt, a wayward wave washes over her head. She loses her grip on the pane and only comes back up with the assistance of several Undine.

"It's okay," Serena puts a hand on Darcy’s shoulder. "We'll make sure he gets home safely. You both will." Turning away from Darcy, Serena shoots Kai a worried look across the panes.

He doesn't return it. Instead, he nudges Liam. "You're up, prince."

Nodding, Liam takes another breath, trying to rein in his lungs. He dips down slightly then shoots himself out of the water, trying to get on top of the pane. Kai moves to help him until Serena shakes her head.

As you say, Kai mouths, backing away.

Liam is able to get one knee on top, then the other. He drags himself all the way up just in time to take a wave to the face. The wolf pup on top yelps, sliding to the edge of the pane.

"Whoa there," Liam catches the pup before he goes over. "Easy now."

The pup straightens on all four wobbly legs, attempting to shake excess water from his fur. Panting, the pup looks at Liam expectantly.

Serena and Kai back off a bit, lending their help to holding the glass panes as steady as possible. The sheer size of the glass helps to keep them floating, but in this storm even a boat would easily capsize.

Lightning strikes the ocean further north, and the boom in the sky is heard only a few seconds after.

"Cordelia's baby?" Serena asks Darcy, partly as a way to distract both of them.

"Ervin is at home with Colin," says Darcy, but she doesn't take her eyes off her son.

Liam steadies himself on two knees, squaring off with the small wolf. "Aiden." He looks the wolf in the eye. "I need you to concentrate. If we go over, you won't be able to swim like this, and it will be difficult for the mermaids to save you."

Even though he is young, in his wolf form Aiden is a little bigger than Liam. The pup whines, pacing.

"Something forced this—what happened on the beach?" asks Liam.

Darcy speaks up from the water. "He found a werewolf skull buried in the sand."

"Fear, then," says Liam. "But he should have more control than this—he always has in the past."

Darcy shrugs, her eyes growing more and more desperate.

"Calm yourself, Aiden." Liam's voice is more forceful this time.

The wolf is still hesitant to obey. He edges in closer to Liam, sniffing the air. A jolt in the waves causes him to slide forward, directly into Liam.

The wolf does not show aggression or fear at the sudden contact. He sniffs with curiosity. Serena can almost see a change in his eyes. They sharpen, and he noses Liam eagerly.

Liam laughs, scratching the pup behind the ears. "He thought the skull was my own."

The wolf pounces on Liam now, causing Liam to laugh even harder.

"He didn't recognize me right away; sometimes a wolf's scent is stronger than his sight." Liam pushes himself up, trying to control the excited muzzle that continues to push into him. "Okay, you've had your fun. Come back to us now, Aiden."

There is a moment of calm. The wind ceases to blow, and although the waves still roll, the pane rides on top of a crest. Fins billowing out, the mermaids work to keep it there.

Short, feathery-light hair drops onto the panes of glass. His transformation is quick, and soon a naked boy is curled up in Liam's arms.

"There you go," Liam murmurs, taking off his own shirt to place over the boy.

"Aiden!" Darcy shouts from the water. With a small push from Serena, Darcy slides up onto the panes as well. Wrapping her arms around her oldest child, she inspects. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, Mom. I'm… sorry," Aiden says, shivering.

"Don't worry; we'll figure it out," she says, wiping wet strands of hair from his forehead.

Liam puts a hand on the boy’s shoulder. "He still shouldn't have been able to shift so easily, not without the full moon."

Mother and son pause, watching while Liam slides his palm down to the boy's wrist, then turns it over to expose soft skin on the other side of the elbow. There are track marks.

"Someone has been giving him my blood."

Chapter Five

“You’re sure about this?” Serena asks Liam. Standing in Ungainly form, the ocean is up to her shoulders and his chest, their feet sinking into squishy, water-logged sand. A wave moves in, gently lifting them up, then down again.

Darcy and Aiden were sent home earlier with news Liam would return to the pack that night. Serena squints but can't make out anything in the dark shadows amidst the forest that lies past the beach.

Liam raises his nose to the air and sniffs. “They’re waitin'. Besides… ” He turns toward Serena, pausing until her eyes met his own. “I’ve been gone long enough.”

“As you say,” Serena says, trepidation tingeing her voice.

“You’re the one that wanted me to go back.” The last word rises in pitch as Liam is pushed forward by another wave.

The pair settle back into the sand.

“Yes, but it was kind of nice having you to myself.” Serena smiles. “My own werewolf, tucked away in the archives like a book waiting to be checked out.”

“You can still speak to me any time, Serena. Just call.” Liam steps forward. “You comin’?”

Serena looks at the shadows again. “You first. Have your reunion. I’ll join in a bit.”

“As you say,” Liam mocks her formal tone, his voice floating away as the waves carry him to shore on their crest.

Serena watches from the breakers. As soon as his feet hit the sand, shadows from in between the trees lengthen, stretching like a myriad of bubbles until they separate and become distinct forms. Hands reach out, sucking Liam into warm embraces. They slap his back and shoulders and prod his midsection while Serena hears snippets of comments.

“…..feeding you…”

“….gone so long…”

As each wave moves past, the conversation is temporarily lost to Serena. Soon, Liam's expression slides from exhilaration to caution. Several members of the pack keep glancing over Liam’s shoulder, eyeing the waves just as Serena eyed the tree line. The questions grow adamant,

the tone of the greeting no longer welcoming. Serena allows the next wave to carry her in a bit further so she can hear.

“Why did they keep you so long?”

"She wouldn’t even let us talk to you—let us see you."

Liam takes a defensive step back from the pack, holding up his hands. The ocean dips to Serena's waist, then her knees, and finally her ankles, until its hold on her disappears.

A pack member she recognizes from her time in the fight ring as Alaric's prisoner is leaning forward, his pointer finger raised in the air. "And she expects to lead—"

He cuts off as Serena takes her place on the beach, with Liam on one side and Dagon, her trident, on the other.

Standing tall, Serena waits beside her brother for the ripples of murmurs to die down.

"The decision to stay was my own," Liam's voice booms out.

Serena gives him a sideways glance. His tone is too formal; the Undine may have rubbed off on him.

Everyone that has gathered under the moonlight looks at him, perhaps expecting something more—some better explanation. Finally, there is movement from the back as someone pushes his way forward.

"Conner!" Relief slackens Liam's face and shoulders, and he looks like his old self again. The two shake hands, pulling together and wrapping their free arms around each other's shoulders.

"It's good to finally see you again, brother," Conner says, then raises an eyebrow at Serena.

She has to admit, she is just as relieved to see Conner. Every time she visited the clan while Liam remained in her keep, it was Conner that helped guide her through pack politics.

Conner steps to the other side of Liam, slapping him on the back. "Serena told us it was your decision to stay, and she's done a good job of learning our ways and even helping out with some issues. But I'm glad you're back, because things are about to get a whole lot harder."

"What?" Serena asks the same time as Liam says, "Why?"

Conner reaches into his back pocket and produces a pink, folded paper. He smooths it out and hands it to Liam. "Because we are being evicted from our trailer park."

"How come you didn't tell me?" Serena snatches the official looking paper from Liam's hands. She squints at the writing. "I don't understand any of these words."

"May I?" asks Liam.

Serena hands the paper back to him, clearing her throat.

As Liam reads the paper, Conner explains, "I didn't tell you because it was just served today. Our trailers sit on a national park. I don't know much of what Cecil, the old man, did to keep the authorities away, but our luck has run out since he died."

Liam stops reading at the mention of Cecil's name, his eyes fixated beyond the paper. Serena was there next to him as they watched Cecil being murdered by Alaric, the old pack leader. It seems Alaric is still doing his best to damage their lives, the consequences of his actions taking effect long after his dead body has been returned to the ocean. Serena puts her hand on Liam's shoulder.

Eyes snapping to her, he takes a deep breath and looks back down at the paper. "We have only ten days to move the entire clan."

"Can you fight it?" asks Serena. "I find it hard to believe this flimsy piece of paper, the color of a salmon's soft underbelly" —she flicks at the citation in Liam's hand— "has the power to make you abandon your home."

"It does," Conner and Liam say together.

"Alaric mentioned a lawyer he had that was able to keep anyone from asking too many questions," says Liam. "Somethin' about claiming the ground as native land. But that lawyer died a year before Cecil did. He was talking to someone new but…"

"But he obviously didn't have the chance to solidify anything before he was killed," Conner finishes for Liam.

Liam drops his hands to his sides and turns to Serena. "We can't move, Serena. Our documents are all forged—I'm not sure they would pass if we tried to integrate into some new community. They'd force the boys to go to school, someone would shift—it would be a disaster." He lowers his voice. "And let's not forget that we could never go very far from your society without feeling like we are being ripped in half."

"We would feel it too." Serena nods. She looks out at the few members of the pack that gathered to welcome Liam home. They shift from foot to foot, some of them wringing their hands.

A few ideas are thrown out, each one quickly tossed aside given the complications of the situation. Finally, Serena offers a solution. "If you are forced to leave, you might just have to come stay with us."

The group goes silent as they contemplate Serena's suggestion.

"That won't go over well, with anyone," says Liam. "But we may not have a choice."

"Let's approach it carefully—but the sooner we can get Society and the clan used to the idea, the better." Serena faces the ocean. "I'll meet you here tomorrow night, Liam. So we can confer further." She gives him a playful wink over her shoulder, knowing he hates the word.

"Oh, Queen Serena, speaking of staying with you… here." Conner points to the tree line where two wolves emerge, escorting a maiden in between them.

Serena turns around, squinting into the dark. "Arista?"

"We almost forgot to make the exchange," says Conner.

Arista looks at Serena, head cocked in confusion.

"Oh… did we?" Serena coughs into her hand. "Very well, then. Come on, Arista." Serena turns her back without waiting and walks into the waves.

"I'm glad you came for me yourself, your majesty." Arista rushes to catch up, hopping over the waves. "I have a request."

"A request?" Serena stops, eyes wide. Arista certainly is not in the position to be issuing requests.

"More hydrocoral," says Arista. "I've run out since I've been with the wolves."

"Oh, I see." Serena nods, walking further into the waves.

Arista smiles. "I knew you would."

"But there is a problem," says Serena, wrapping her hand just above Arista's elbow.

"A problem?" asks Arista. Her smile falters.

"Yes. You see…" Serena stops to face Arista, her hand squeezing tight. "You'll have no cause for using hydrocoral."

"But I do," says Arista. "I need it to—"

Serena shakes her head, cutting the maiden off. "Not in prison you won't."

Chapter Six

"You brought her back here? To the Great Hall?" Kai asks, stepping forward from the group of council members, already reaching for the chains in his dry bag.

Arista crosses her arms, mumbling. "That's not all she's bringing."

"What?" Now Kai crosses his arms, asking Serena, "What else?"

Glaring at Arista, Serena takes the chains from Kai and shackles Arista herself. "You know the way?"

Shoulders sagging, Arista nods.

"Kai?" Serena dismisses him from the council to escort the prisoner. The queen could do without his questions right now.

After the pair leaves, Serena takes a deep breath and faces the council. Members present are the Head Gardener, the Head Scientist, Head of the Guard, and the Queen's Second. "We might have to make room in our caves," she says. "The wolves are coming."

"Here? You want to bring them here, to the heart of the Kingdom?" gawks Sarafina.

Serena's eyes snap to the Head Gardener.

"Your majesty?" Nerin, the Queen's Second, leans forward into Serena's peripheral view. "Just to clarify—you want to try to bring the entire clan here?"

Clearing her throat, Serena nods. "If they are forced to leave their home, we have two choices. We go with them, or we allow them to live here."

Sarafina steps forward, perhaps emboldened by Nerin's question. "Surely there is some other—"

"Have you ever tried to leave, Sarafina?" Serena interrupts.

"No, your majesty." Sarafina's spine goes rigid, and she stops short of the first step leading up to the throne.

"I was told several maidens attempted to migrate, once they discovered they were with calfling, to find safer beaches to give birth." Serena pins Sarafina with a glare.

"Yes, that much is true, your majesty. But I wasn't one of them."

"Then go find one, Sarafina, and speak to them. Let them tell you the horrors they experienced when they strayed too far. And if you still do not believe, swim out well past the borders of our kingdom. Experience the pain yourself. But don't turn around too soon. Don't turn when you become sluggish, when your whole body grows heavy. Don't turn when you feel as though you are too tired to continue. The weight that overcomes you will settle deep in your bones until you feel they may snap in half. Then, and only then, Sarafina, is when you may turn back. Because if you go farther, I fear you will never be able to inform the rest of the maidens how it felt." Serena realizes she is on the edge of her throne, leaning forward.

Sarafina herself has retreated several steps.

"Well." Serena forces herself to lean back. "You are excused, Sarafina. Find out what you must."

There is a momentary look of confusion as Sarafina knits her eyebrows together, then she gives a quick curtsey and turns, avoiding meeting the eyes of the rest of the council.

Serena's shoulders sag as she brings her fingertips to her temples.

"Your majesty?" Nerin's soft voice slides through the ringing in Serena's ears. "Do you really think it safe, bringing them here?"

"No," Serena says, dropping her hands into her lap. "It probably isn't safe for anyone. But what choice do we have?"

"We would have to have collars made—for them all. To keep them from shifting," says Murphy, Head of the Guard. He stands as if he is about to go give Ronan the task right away.

"I won't have them wearing collars," says Serena. "The risk is too great; they could hurt themselves."

"They could hurt themselves?" Murphy looks at Serena, eyes wide and voice almost an octave higher. "Since when are you concerned with the welfare of the werewolves?"

"Tell me, Murphy, if someone were to collar you, would you expect me to protest?"

His eyes dart from the queen to Nerin, as if he’s suddenly found himself in a trap.

"Well?" asks Serena.

"Yes, your majesty." Murphy bows. "I would certainly appreciate your intervention."

"I am their queen—same as yours," says Serena. "And I will treat them as such."

"May I just point out," Evandre interrupts, stepping forward.

Serena lifts an eyebrow, pinning the Head Scientist with a glare that says she certainly may not.

Evandre continues anyway. "That the Undine were here first, serving—"

"How old are you, Evandre?" Nerin speaks up beside Serena.

"I don't see what—"

"Answer the Queen's Second," Serena interrupts.

"Thirty-eight years, next month."

Nerin turns to Serena. "This werewolf, the one who remains by your side when you are in The Dry, Conner. How old is he, your majesty?"

Serena smiles. "Forty-eight."

"Forty-eight years ago, an Undine calfling was born to Society. By unfortunate circumstance, he was born a weak male and had to endure a life-altering transformation and abandonment. Conner is ten years your senior, Evandre. And, at the very least, we can make an effort not to kill him by strangulation."

Evandre concedes, stepping back.

"Still, your majesty." Nerin dips her head toward Serena. "There are other things to consider. Do we have enough space for them? How can we safely transport them all to the caves? And, most importantly—" Nerin lowers her voice "—will our dying habitat provide enough food to support them all?"

Judging by her tone, the Queen's Second already knows the answer to her last question. Serena sighs. "Have you been to the dining hall, recently?"

"I have, just this pass night," says Nerin. "And may I suggest you do the same."

"There is something you aren't telling me, Nerin." Serena narrows her eyes.

"For sure," Nerin says, attempting a smile. "But I gather Rayne never had any problems in that area."

"No, she hasn't." Standing from her throne, Serena grabs her trident. "I will call Assembly tonight and announce our plans."

A flurry of questions rise up from the council. Only the guards that escort Serena out of the Great Hall remain silent. It is the one saving grace

of having to be constantly followed.

After telling the guards to wait at the entrance to the orphanage turned dining hall, Serena calls out. "Mother Rayne?"

The room is as silent as the day Serena moved into a cave of her own. For several years after, the facility was filled only with the ghostly echo of calflings long since grown along with the occasional sweep of Mother Rayne's broom. Recently, the space has found a second life serving as a dining hall for Society.

The unnerving silence causes a pang of worry to bloom at the back of Serena's skull. "Anyone here?"

The sharp clang of pots banging together rings out from the back.

"Hello?" Serena skirts around the weathered table and walks into the kitchen.

"Your majesty, I didn't see you there." Rayne bustles around the floor, scooping up several flopping fish trying to make their escape.

Bending to her knees, Serena grasps a salmon with one hand, placing it back in the red-and-blue cooler—a gift from Liam. "You don't have to call me that, especially when it's just us."

"Wasn't sure, you usually have an entourage behind you." Rayne picks up the last of the fish, then stands, brushing her hands down the side of her legs. She finally looks at Serena. "I'm sorry, dear. I'm in quite the mood."

"Is that why no one is here?"

"No one is here because I sent them away."

"Why?" Serena uses a jar to fill the cooler with fresh sea water coming up through a hole in the kitchen floor, then shuts the lid.

Walking to her large pantry, Rayne flings open the door. Jars that normally hold drying seaweed and herbs are bare.

"Where is all the food?" asks Serena.

"The past few months, the gardeners have started bringing back less and less. The problem is whatever plants they do manage to harvest are that much less for fish to feed on or find shelter around. The fewer the plants, the fewer the fish. The whole food chain is affected, which poses quite the problem when we are on the top of it." Rayne walks over to a counter carved directly into the cave wall and leans against it. "I've been in denial myself about the situation, which is why I haven't reported it. But yesterday, I went out to see for myself."

"And?" asks Serena.

"And…" starts Rayne. "Well, to put it bluntly, Serena, we don't have much time left."

"We aren't the only ones." Serena looks at the bare pantry again, then back to Rayne's haggard face, etched with lines of worry. The smell of fish rises up from the kitchen floor, taunting Serena and making her stomach turn. She staggers to the dining room table to sit.

Mother Rayne follows, thumping down beside Serena with a sigh. Serena watches out of the corner of her eye as Rayne's shoulders slump deeper, her spine curved in an uncommon Undine trait of resignation.

Each sigh from Rayne helps pump more and more resolve into Serena, until her back is as straight as Nerin's. "Okay. How much time do we have left?"

"Not enough." Rayne shakes her head.

"Rayne!" Serena snaps.

Rayne sits up, looking at Serena. "A month at our current rate, though I could probably stretch it to two or three. The problem would be keeping every Undine from scrounging what grounds are left. Even those considered sufficiently stocked won't last long with every maiden making a grab for what they can. And they will horde, especially once they find out my stocks are low."

"Okay, I'll issue a decree. All personal food stocks are to be brought here. Starting tonight, all meals are to be served from your kitchen. No unauthorized dining, either in the open ocean or in personal caves."

"You want to… regularize eating?" Rayne openly gapes at Serena, but Serena imagines that is one of the milder reactions she will receive when she announces it to the rest of Society.

"We will have to, if we are to make it last. You'll need to put together a schedule, and you'll need help. I'll send some your way."

Finally able to close her mouth, Rayne just nods.

"I'm going to call Assembly tonight—you'll want to be there."

"I can't imagine this is going to go over very well, but I'll be there front and center for you, Serena." Rayne takes a step closer, resting her hand on Serena's shoulder. "May I suggest you keep Dagon close and those guards of yours even closer."

"That, I can do," says Serena, thinking more of Kai than she is of her trident.

Chapter Seven

"This isn't going to go over well," Nerin whispers to Serena as they both watch Undine maidens file into The Great Hall for Assembly.

"So I've been told," mumbles Serena.

Nerin doesn't even bother with the expected *'a queen does not mumble'* reprimand. "You need to announce the new decrees and shoot down anyone that questions them. End Assembly quickly without taking any questions. You know—the way your father used to do it," says Nerin.

"I never liked the way he did it."

"A queen does not mumble, Serena," says Nerin. "Sit up properly. Confidence now."

The last of the maidens are coming in, and Serena knows Nerin is right.

It's time to look like the queen you hope they see.

Reluctantly, Serena straightens her back. Without Nerin having to officially start Assembly, everyone quiets and looks at Serena—it appears half of them know what to expect. Judging from pressed lips and defiant glares, they aren't happy about allowing werewolves into their home.

No problem – I can dispel the notion right now, thinks Serena.

"The werewolves are being forced to leave their home." Serena's voice rings throughout the cavern, clear and loud.

Throughout The Great Hall, Painted Maidens tighten their fists, as if they are already preparing to defend themselves from the beasts.

"And we will go with them." There is no echo from Serena' words. They die without preamble against cold, hard rock.

Nerin's advice was unnecessary—no one argues with Serena. They all stare back at her with blank faces. Serena licks her lips and exchanges a nervous glance with Nerin.

"We will migrate with Clan Werich away from here," Serena says, just in case she didn't say it loudly enough already.

Again with the blank faces.

Serena doesn't think she has ever heard The Great Hall so silent. Even the stalactites have ceased to drip.

"We are given no choice but to go. We cannot be separated from the clan, and as many of our gardeners already know, our food supply runs

short." Despite clearing her throat twice, Serena's voice wavers with uncertainty. "Therefore, until we are ready to depart, all personal food stocks are to be given to Rayne's kitchen. And starting tonight, all meals are to be served from her dining hall."

Against Nerin's instructions, Serena opens the floor because the silence is unnerving. "Any questions?"

Slowly, the maidens begin to spark to life. One dainty hand rises in the air.

"Yes?" Serena asks.

"Last week was my naming day, and my mother gave me dried nori. It is my favorite." Maidens shift to see who is speaking, and Serena catches a glimpse of orange. Sophia Sunbeam. Her sister Sasha was a casualty the last time the maidens attempted to take the beach.

Serena swallows hard at the memory.

"May I keep those, your majesty?" Sophia asks.

"I'm sorry, but every scrap of food must be turned in so we may ration meals. Society thanks you for your sacrifice." Serena's voice sounds hollow even to her own ears. Everyone knows the Sunbeam family has sacrificed much more than a couple sheets of dried nori. Nevertheless, Sophia nods in acquiesce.

Another hand rises to the air. "Will the kitchen be open at any time? I enjoy… snacking."

"A schedule will be announced," Serena says before turning to the next hand. "Yes?"

"We gardeners work in the coral fields all night. Our midnight meal comes from the open ocean. Are we no longer allowed to dine there?"

"No," says Serena. "Food will be brought to you." The tension eases out of Serena's shoulders. The questions are easy to answer. When one of the elderly crones hobbles toward the front of Assembly, Serena turns her attention to her. "Yes?"

"My large chest contains several family heirlooms," says the crone.

"Okay…" Serena gestures for her to continue. *What does this have to do with food rations?*

"I respectfully request assistance transporting the chest on The Migration, your majesty."

Serena's eyes go wide—the demand catches her off guard. "I apologize. There won't be any room for personal items on The Migration. Society

thanks you for—"

"Then I won't be going," the crone interrupts.

"What?" Formality leaves Serena.

"If I cannot bring my inheritance, I cannot accompany the maidens. I won't leave it behind."

Serena glances at Nerin for help, but even the Queen's Second looks to be at a loss for words.

"Why does our food supply run low, anyway?" someone shouts from the back of the room. "What are the gardeners doing all day?"

Stepping out of the council line, Sarafina raises her voice. "My gardeners work harder than any other chosen responsibility."

Out of the corner of her eye, Serena can see Murphy and Kai exchange dubious glances.

"And how do we know Rayne will distribute rations fairly—those who work more will require more sustenance!"

"How do we know the queen isn't leading us into a trap?"

Serena slouches, burying her head in her hands. This is finally the response she was expecting. Ignoring Nerin's disapproving murmurs, Serena continues to slouch, only straightening when she sees Rayne elbow her way out of the crowd. Rayne moves up to the mid-platform then turns to face Society.

Without a word, Rayne fixes the loudest talkers with her stare, tapping her foot. Serena recognizes the stance. It is the same one Mother Rayne used when eliciting the truth from a guilty calfling. In front of her, Society abstains from commenting further about their queen's intentions.

"I will ensure that every Undine receive their fair share of food and, furthermore, that individual rations are stored in preparation for The Migration. If maidens are caught hiding, hording, or sneaking unauthorized food the equivalent will be deducted from your personal allotment." Rayne pauses, looking at Serena for consent.

Serena nods, silently thanking Poseidon for Rayne's interference.

Rayne softens her voice. "I understand these measures seem harsh, but so is the situation. Without the queen's guidance to ration food, we would most certainly starve before we even had a chance to migrate to more sustaining waters."

Serena finally releases the grip she has on the armrests of her oversized throne.

"I, for one," continues Rayne, "am thankful to have such an insightful, clever, and courageous leader as Serena guiding the Undine through these difficult times."

The Painted Maidens remain silent—no one would dispute the character of the queen directly to the woman who raised her.

"Thank you, Mother Rayne," Serena leans forward.

Rayne turns, curtseying to Serena. With her back to the rest of Society, she gives Serena a wink and a smile.

After Rayne disappears into the crowd, dragging the old crone that started the whole thing with her, Serena stands from her throne. "Assembly is dismissed. Those who have questions, concerns, or specific requests, please remain so we may confer on an individual basis."

Now I'm beginning to hate that word as much as Liam.

Serena descends to the mid-platform while maidens either leave The Great Hall or form a line that leads to Serena. Finishing the exchange of hushed whispers with Sarafina and Evandre, Serena turns to the line.

Her shoulders sag. At least half of the maidens remain. Steeling herself, and wishing she had some of Sophia's dried nori to sustain her through the night, Serena receives the first maiden.

By the time she has made her way through most of the line, Serena's back aches, and she has a pounding headache. "You may only bring items that will fit in your personal dry bag," says Serena for what must be the thirtieth time. It is quickly followed by the thirtieth crestfallen face.

The maiden steps away with downturned lips, and the last requestor steps forward. Serena has to lift her chin to look the colossal Undine in the eye.

"You too, Murphy?" she asks. "Are you here to request Society move your valuables?"

"No, your majesty." Murphy bows. "I am here to ask when you might be visiting the werewolf clan again so I may organize some of my men to escort you."

Serena yawns, glancing at the small arched doorway leading to her quarters and the promise of peace. "Liam just returned to them. I thought I might give them some time before infringing again."

"Understood, my queen. But if the werewolves were to catch wind that the Undine are preparing to leave quickly, they could misinterpret it as another abandonment."

"Right," Serena sighs. "We can't have that."

Chapter Eight

"Serena!" Robbie, the youngest of the three boys run at her, full speed, barely slowing before he can wrap his arms around her.

Serena stumbles back, catching her footing only to be knocked to the side by the second boy.

It is a welcome change from the stiff formalities of the court, with all the 'my queen' this and 'your majesty' that.

"Serena!" Darcy follows the noise caused by her boys from around their doublewide trailer. Her oldest, Aiden, follows but hangs back as soon as he sees Serena.

"Boys," Darcy directs, "give her some space."

Despite her own command, as soon as the children clear out, Darcy wraps her arms around Serena. "Liam said you weren't coming back until tomorrow."

A small squeak erupts in protest between the two women.

They pull apart, and Serena bends to look more closely at the baby in Darcy's arms. "Something came up. How is our little Ervin fairing?" Serena asks, wiggling her pinky in front of the baby.

He eyes Serena's finger but doesn't reach for it.

"He sleeps a lot," says Darcy. "And is much weaker than I remember my boys at this stage. But he has a strong will—he'll be all right."

Serena's eyes fall to Aiden, still hanging back by the trailer. She gives a small wave, and he at least lifts a hand in response before looking away. Serena looks back to Darcy. "Is he okay?"

"Oh, he's fine. Mostly just embarrassed about the whole thing." Darcy keeps one arm around Serena's shoulders. "He is grateful for your assistance, along with that of your maidens. We all are."

"It was gladly given," says Serena, trying hard to remain as casual as Darcy is. "But I might ask a favor that you spread the word of Undine assistance to the rest of the pack. We're about to endure some trials, and we all need to be on the same team."

"Done," says Darcy. "Hard to keep something like that a secret for long—especially with these two regaling the story to anyone who'll listen." She ruffles the hair on top of each of her youngest boys.

"Auntie Serena—did you really hold Liam's wolf out of the water for hours during a cyclone?" asks Robbie.

"Not quite," Serena laughs. "I had help." Then she looks at Darcy. "Auntie?"

Darcy shrugs, shifting Ervin to her other arm. "They call Liam 'Uncle'—seems fitting. Unless you prefer 'your majesty'?"

The boys actually giggle at this.

"Can I get *your majesty* some tea?" Robbie mocks while bowing more stiffly than Nerin might.

"They don't even drink tea." The other boy nudges Robbie. "They drink…" he trails off, then looks at Serena for clarification.

She bends, motioning them closer with the crook of her finger. They lean in, turning their heads to hear the secret.

"Fish blood," she whispers.

"Eww!" Robbie staggers back, grabbing his throats while making exaggerated gagging noises.

"Cool!" says his older brother.

"Hush, boys," Darcy admonishes with a smile on her face. "Get back in the house. You can watch TV until the men leave. Aiden—find cartoons for them, please."

"Yeah!" the younger boys cheer in unison, then disappear around the corner, followed by a brooding older brother.

"What men?" asks Serena, starting to follow the boys.

Placing gentle fingers on Serena's elbows, Darcy stops her. "The humans that dropped off the citation earlier still haven't left. Probably best if you aren't seen right now."

The women peek out from behind the trailer.

"They've been inspecting the camp all day. Preparations for kicking us out, I think," Darcy says, her voice low.

Next to a cluster of vehicles—a mix of local police and government cars—a group of men stand in a semi-circle. Liam and Conner are in front of them giving explanations with subtle hand motions. Serena tries to read how the message is being received. There are many crossed arms.

"Some think they’re searching for weapons and trying to determine if there will be any resistance," says Darcy.

"Did they find anything?"

Darcy shakes her head. "The back of those cop cars would be occupied if they had. This is national park land—laws on firearms tend to be strict. Besides, Liam got rid of them all after Alaric died. The bigger problem we had was my boys. The authorities wanted to know why they weren't in school."

Serena's head snaps to Darcy. "They wouldn't take your children away, would they?"

"Told them I homeschool. It stood for now but if they look into it any further we'll have trouble. I'm supposed to register my lesson plan with the state, but the boys don't even have social insurance numbers. They didn't exactly have a… documented birth."

Serena shakes her head. "There is no way Undine will be able to integrate with the humans, as difficult a time as the wolves have."

It is Darcy's turn to look at Serena. "You planning on leaving?"

"We have to." Serena shrugs. "If you do. But not only that—our food is running out."

"That's not good. I've got some granola bars if you…" Darcy trails off at the look Serena gives her.

The sound of motors whirring to life attract the women's attention. The officials are shaking hands with Liam and Conner and returning to their cars and leaving. As the dirt kicked up by the convoy settles, Conner sees Serena peeking out from the trailer. He nudges Liam, and the pair begins to walk over.

"Werewolves and mermaids," mutters Darcy under her breath. "How many are there – more than a hundred altogether?"

Serena nods, the corner of her lips pulled back in a grim smirk.

"Where the hell can we go?"

Serena gestures to the satellite on top of the trailer. "Can you research it? Can you find a place?"

"I will," says Darcy. "I'll let you know." Nodding to the guys approaching, Darcy hugs Serena again. "I've got to get little Erving fed and all the kids to bed. Thank you again for your help yesterday."

"Dear god, Serena – if those guys had seen you." Liam is checking over his shoulder as if they might come charging back any moment.

"Good to see you, too, brother. Enjoying your time above the land, instead of below it?"

Having the wherewithal to look sheepish, Liam scratches the back of his neck. "Not gonna lie, as good as it feels to have the sun on my face, it's ten times better to feel the moon on it."

Serena smiles, fully sharing her brother's affection for the moon. She nods at the dust cloud left behind by the group of cars as they pulled away. "Darcy told me about them."

"Liam was able to talk them into a thirty day extension." Conner pats Liam on the back. "But that still isn't a whole lot of time."

"For you or for us," says Serena.

"Why?" Liam asked. "What's going on?"

"Our food sources are running out. We need to move on, too."

"Seriously?" asks Liam. "That is out of the blue." He puts his hands on his hips and taps his foot. "You aren't just saying that for an excuse to force them to move, are you?

"Liam—I just spent the good part of the moon's light sitting in a rigid throne, listening to crones threaten to tie themselves to their grandmother's chest of jewels to prevent me from forcing them to leave." Serena throws her hands in the air in a desperate gesture. "Maidens complained there is no way to bring their wall paintings with them. One actually asked if the guards could use their tridents to break chunks of the cave off so her precious artwork could accompany us. Can you imagine? The tridents would break in two!"

Liam looks as if he is actually stifling a smile. "No, I literally cannot imagine forcin' that whole society to move."

"No need to imagine," says Conner. "We'll be right there alongside them."

Snorting, Liam looks from Conner to Serena. "I'm havin' blatant visions of wolves hikin' the beaches with the Undine out at sea, throwin' over a fish every now and then."

"Well, no—that wouldn't work," says Serena. "The pH levels of the water will change. We can't swim in variable water for long, though we would need the occasional dip. Remember how sick I got last time I was out of the water for only a few days?"

"So, what then? Pack both our clans into boats? They'd be clawin' at each other's throats before long." Liam rubs his own neck at the thought.

"We'll have to work out logistics," says Serena. "We have thirty days?"

Liam and Conner both nod.

"You'll let your pack know to start preparations."

"Oh, no, your majesty." Liam places his hand on the back of Serena's shoulder, pushing her forward. "They don't get their orders from me. Come on. I'll call a meetin'."

Serena sighs, emerging from the shade of the trees. "Just… don't give me an uncomfortable chair."

"We address the pack from the warehouse." Liam looks at her sideways.

"I remember it," says Serena, shuddering at the thought of returning to the makeshift fight ring.

"Don't worry, your majesty," Liam pats her hand. "I've had all the thrones tossed out into the ocean for you."

"Not funny, Liam." She smiles anyway. "Besides, your trash ends up at my doorstep anyway."

"Exactly," he winks.

Chapter Nine

By the time Serena enters the warehouse, the clan has packed it full wall to wall. Gazes fall on her, and she can feel the hostility rolling off of them in waves. They are in their Ungainly forms, but the wolves don't lurk very far underneath.

And this time there will be no Rayne, Serena thinks as she makes her way to an opening around the rink. The crowd here doesn't part for Serena as they did for Alaric. *Not yet anyway.*

"Quiet down, everybody," Liam raises his voice above the chatter and grumbling.

Serena can at least sympathize. After strangers snooping around all day putting everyone on edge, the wolves are called to a meeting by a leader they haven't yet come to love, much less respect.

She skirts around the metal poles and subconsciously rubs at her wrists, cringing at the feeling of chains that are no longer there that held her to those poles. Alaric detained Serena and Liam as hostages, forcing Serena to call her own people. The only one that came was Alaric's mother, Isadora—the Undine psychic. Serena stares at the pillars, wondering if Isadora saw her own death coming.

"Serena…" Liam's voice cuts through her memories.

"Sorry," she says, clearing her throat, but she can't take her eyes off the poles. "You know what? I'm not sorry."

"What?" Liam asks, casting confused glances at the metal poles.

"I want these removed. This clan will no longer take prisoners—Undine, Ungainly, or werewolf."

A stunned silence falls over those gathered inside the warehouse. Serena watches the looks of disgust fade into glimmers of curiosity.

Encouraged, Serena raises her voice. "Does anyone have a problem with this?"

No one answers. Liam sends Conner and another away to find shovels and spades.

"How did you explain these to the authorities anyway?" Serena asks, flicking the ominous-looking chains hanging from the top.

"Tetherball," says Liam.

"Is that like bowling?" she asks, remembering their conversation from the night they met.

Liam smiles. "Not quite."

There is an awkward silence as they wait for equipment to dig. Serena clears her throat, whispering to Liam, "Were you able to find out who is giving Aiden the injections?"

Liam shakes his head. "No, and Aiden isn't talking—about anything these days, really."

"Well, keep me updated…" she trails off as several men return with their tools.

They pause as they make a lopsided circle around the poles.

"Both of them?" Conner turns to look at Serena.

"Yes, both." Serena rubs her wrists. "Quickly."

The first shovel slices into hard-packed dirt. It sounds like the knife slashing through Isadora's throat. Serena turns her back to the arena and swallows hard. She scans the crowd before her for a distraction. The noticeable hostility has left the warehouse, but Serena isn't sure she likes the open mouths and wide eyes any better. "Did I do something wrong?" she asks Liam.

Liam steps closer. "Those poles weren't only used for prisoners. Alaric often kept clan members tied to them for punishments. Sometimes for a whippin', sometimes he just kept them there for a couple days without food and water."

Serena's face grows hot with anger. "I had no idea."

"This is a good thing. It's like the last of Alaric's rule is comin' down."

Serena glances at the crowd again. As one pole falls, she can almost see tension lift right out of the pack. The other pole drops with a loud thump in the sand, sending a plume of dust into the air.

Conner sticks his shovel into the ground. "What do you want us to do with these?"

Serena turns to the crowd. "Any suggestions?"

Everyone is quiet for a long time. No one can tear their eyes from the now harmless, fallen poles. Finally, someone steps forward. He is shorter and skinnier than most of the others. Stumbling a bit when he walks, he opens a flask, and the pungent smell of liquor floats out. He weaves his way in between Serena, Liam, and those who dug up the poles. He stops in front one of them and pours out the entire flask of liquid.

When the last drops fall, he gives the flask a violent shake, then throws it against the back of the warehouse. Turning to Serena, he growls much more fiercely than she would expect from that small a man. "Give them to me. I'm goin' to melt them down."

"Danny has more hours tied to those poles than any of us," Liam whispers to Serena.

Without another word, Danny turns his back to Serena and Liam and removes his shirt. Pink and white scar tissue crisscrosses his skin. Serena couldn't lay her palm anywhere on his back without touching the raised welts.

When he turns around once again, Serena looks him in the eye. "They are yours for the taking."

Danny bends to pick up the poles and throws them both over his shoulders. Exiting the warehouse, he leaves his flask and his shirt behind.

"Danny was the second wolf transformed after Alaric," says Liam, his voice low. "They were friends for a while, but when it came time for one of them step up as Alpha… well, things didn't go well. Hopefully Danny won't need his liquor anymore just to get through the day."

"He won't try to step up as Alpha now that Alaric is gone?" Serena asks.

"No," says Liam. "There already is an Alpha." He extends an arm, motioning for her to step forward and take the stage.

"Right," says Serena, taking a deep breath. No point in delaying the inevitable. She raises her voice so everyone can hear. "We are leaving."

"Who's leavin'?" shouts someone.

"All of us. Werewolves and Undine. We will be traveling together to seek new land to share together. Somewhere we can be safe."

"Where, exactly?" another voice calls out.

"I'm leaving that to Darcy. If you have any suggestions, please see her. It will be next to water, obviously, but a lot of research is required." The more Serena talks, the more she believes Darcy is the best to make the decision. The clan already trusts her, and she'll want to find a place to raise her boys. As far as the Undine go, they already have taken a liking to her. She is the only woman in the clan, after all.

"How soon?" Someone else asks.

"One month," says Serena.

"It will still be difficult to be ready that soon," says Liam. "I might be able to get another extension from the authorities to stay longer."

"It isn't just the clan we have to consider," says Serena. "The Undine are running out of food. We leave in a month." She turns to Liam. "Start your preparations. I'll be on the shore one hour after dusk every night if it is clear of Ungainlies. You can report your progress, and I'll inform you of ours."

As soon as Liam nods, Serena walks forward, straight toward the crowd. She keeps her steps long and quick and her chin held high. Those in the front step to the side, and an even line parts as the queen exits the warehouse.

Chapter Ten

During the next few weeks, preparations to move two entire societies get underway. Except for nightly updates on the wolf clan progress from Liam, Serena's focus is on the Undine kingdom, and they are proving to be a resistant bunch.

"Seven of the elderly maidens have barricaded themselves inside a cave. They say they are refusing to leave with the rest of Society," Murphy tells Serena as each council member reports progress for The Migration.

"Have the crones stolen any of Rayne's food?" asks Serena.

"No." Murphy clears his throat. "My guards made sure of that. As a matter of fact, the crones insist no food is left for them. They want to send it all on with us for The Migration."

"So they will be traveling to the afterlife while the rest of us travel to bluer waters?"

"If it will be as they say, your majesty." Murphy bows.

Serena sighs. "And the strength of their barricade?"

"I could have it brought down in a matter of minutes."

Serena nods. "Leave them there, for now. They will cause less trouble than they have been. And make sure to pass food through."

"If they refuse it?" Murphy asks as though he has already attempted it.

"If they refuse the food, let them know they will be bound and gagged until we reach our destination. Is that all, Murphy?"

"One more thing, your majesty. Arista has once again requested hydrocoral."

"Denied." Serena waves her hand in dismissal. *At least that one was easy.*

Murphy bows and steps aside.

"Health?" Serena asks Hailey.

Hailey flits in front of Serena on light toes. Loose skin hangs under tired eyes, but she acts as though she has energy to spare. "Weight loss is prevalent, though not dangerous."

"Good," says Serena. "Hopefully it means sneaking extra food in the coral fields has stopped."

"Right," says Hailey. "But with less sustenance, the polluted waters seem to have more of an effect. Almost half the population has been to my quarters as a result of torn webbing. And thanks to your Ungainly apparatus—"

"The microscope?" Serena interrupts. For some reason, Hailey refuses to use the Ungainly word.

"Yes, apologies," she chirps. "Scale samples are showing more fissures and weaker structures."

"I'm not sure there is anything we can do about that until after The Migration," says Serena.

"Most likely not, your majesty," agrees Hailey. "But it means we will be very vulnerable during The Migration, and we will need our werewolf protectors more than ever before."

Hailey's words caste a somber silence over the council. Though Serena has had plenty of experience with the wolves, not many other Undine have. All that remains in their memory is the recent battle on Cliff Beach and perhaps even the Maiden's Massacre. There are bonds of trust that need to be established before the two groups can embark on their journey as one.

"Understood, Hailey. I will see to it."

Hailey curtsies and hops aside for Evandre, who barely waits for the Healer to vacate the area.

"Your majesty," the Head Scientist bobs her head without lowering her eyes. "I must insist we delay departure until I can travel to the selected destination myself. I have to check salinity, acidity, temperature, and food sources before we can even think about sending forth our Painted Maidens."

"We've been over this, Evandre," says Serena. "If we delay any further we risk starvation. And the wolves will have to move on anyway—neither species will survive if we separate."

"I can investigate and find a way to survive the separation—"

"And how long do you think that will take? One month? Two? A year? Odds are we will run out of food before you can find a cure for separation. And that cure still won't solve our own problems. Please focus, Evandre," Serena looks at the council member before her.

They all stand as stiff as planks. It is obvious Evandre is dead against rekindling an alliance with the werewolves—and there are plenty of maidens that follow her lead.

If I could convince Evandre, maybe I could convince the rest Society.

Serena speaks carefully. "I understand your need to see that the Undine are traveling to a safe place, and Society thanks you for your protection. The one Ungainly who lives with the wolves left a week ago to seek a new home. She is tasked with bringing back water samples. I will arrange it with Liam so that you may confer on our new home with her. Will that suffice?" asks Serena.

"As you say." The Head Scientist doesn't even curtsey before she walks away.

Serena sighs. "If that is all from the council?"

Several heads bob up and down.

"Kai, I'll take leave to visit Liam. Do you wish to accompany me?" Serena stands from her throne.

Kai jaunts up the few steps, holding out his elbow for Serena to take. The council members have conveniently turned their backs in whispered conversation, and Murphy is giving the guard their orders. While no one is paying attention, Serena takes her time descending the few stairs to the mid-platform. Running the pads of her fingers along the inside of Kai's arm, she allows herself to break decorum and look up at him. He is already smiling back at her, both of them anticipating time alone, even if it is just for a short trip to The Dry.

* * *

When Kai and Serena reach the surface of the Pacific Northwest waters, the beaches are empty of Ungainlies, but it isn't quite dusk.

"The sun is taking its sweet time to retire," observes Serena after dipping her hair back under to keep cool from the harsh rays.

"Let it," says Kai. He wraps one arm around Serena, bringing her closer. "More time for us."

"And if someone sees?" asks Serena. She raises the pitch of her voice and over-annunciates, imitating Nerin. "It wouldn't do for the queen to be caught flirting with a guard member. What would Society think?" Despite the fact their relationship has been publically known for at least a month, Nerin insists Serena and Kai cannot show affection for one another in front of anyone else.

Kai laughs. "Like Murphy has never been caught—by Nerin herself, her own mother."

"Kai Forest, don't lie!"

"I swear to Poseidon, I'm not."

"Which maiden was he caught with?" Serena's jaw drops.

"Hailey."

A rolling wave comes through, bumping the pair together. They laugh again.

"She talks about him sometimes, but I never thought the feelings were mutual." Serena remembers the look on Nerin's face when she caught Hailey merely discussing Murphy with Serena. If his feelings were mutual, they were kept well under wraps, on account of his mother.

The waves grow rough as the wind picks up.

"Come on," says Kai. "I have an idea." He takes Serena by the hand and swims them both into rougher surf.

"Kai, what are you—" The next wave crashes over their heads, cutting Serena off.

Tossed and turned, colliding into each other and pulled apart just as quickly, they flounder like guppies in the water. Serena straightens herself out, finding the surface and popping above just to be pushed below again by the next wave. Kai rolls by in front of her, sticking out his tongue while his tail is tangled in kelp.

Serena laughs as she breaks the kelp apart for him. As soon as he is free, he pulls her up. Picking up speed, Kai and Serena glide along the surface, angling in to join another wave. This time, they slide in front of it just as the crest folds forward, wrapping them in a tunnel of brackish blue. Kai continues to jut forward, but turns on his back and dips below the surface. He pulls Serena on top of him so her chest rests on his stomach. She rides the wave just as she has seen the Ungainly surfers do, lying down on their boards.

Holding her arms like wings, Serena's fingertips skim the watery tunnel on each side. Here in the ocean's breakers, between The Deep and The Dry, Serena is finally afforded a little privacy from both worlds and her title as queen.

A wide grin spreads across her face as she looks down at Kai in gratitude. She pulls him up just as the tunnel condenses, then collapses in

on itself. They endure the chaotic aftermath, tickling each other as they roll into calmer surf.

Catching their breath, their heads bob above water. Pure delight dances across Serena's face with the last light of the sun, and she looks at Kai. "I want to pair with you.” The words are out of her mouth as soon as the thought enters her head. Her eyes go wide. Kai looks just as stunned.

"Are you sure?" he asks, giving her a chance to retract the statement.

Serena bites her lip, her eyes falling to the frothy water surrounding them. The time between waves lengthens, as if the ocean herself awaits Serena's answer. Finally, she looks up to Kai. "No more waiting, Kai. I'm ready, and I wish to pair with you—if you'll have me."

His eyes light up, and he squeezes her face in between his hands, drawing her lips to his. A breath she doesn't know he was holding escapes as his lips relax open. He tastes of salt. Another wave finally breaks, taking them both by surprise. He wraps his tail around hers as their arms snake around each other.

The wave pushes them under in a tumultuous celebration, and they hold on tight as the world spins around them. Hitting the sandy sea floor, they break apart. Serena's hair has escaped her braid and black tendrils reach out, brushing Kai's cheek.

Right here, right now, there are no worries in the world. There is nothing but Kai and all the fun, the security, and the affection he brings. Serena can't pretend the moment will last forever, but she knows if Kai is by her side then she can face anything.

The sun dips below the horizon, and Serena's blood tingles with the strengthening rays of the moon. One hand interlocked with Kai’s, Serena leads the way into The Dry. Scales sink into skin and she barely registers the sting. All she can feel is the smooth ridges between Kai's knuckles with the taste of him still lingering on her lips.

Water gives way to earth and her legs disconnect from each other to form feet. Wiggling webbed toes in grainy sand, Serena and Kai stand together as a wave recedes, taking the last of the salty seawater shed from their bodies with it.

Liam hasn't made an appearance yet, and Serena is thankful for a few more moments alone with Kai—especially with the prospect of a pairing fresh in her mind.

"Should we wait until The Migration?" asks Serena.

Kai turns to her, taking both of her hands in his. "More than likely, we will never see these beaches again," he says. "Everything is about to change—but before it does I'd like our pairing to be in the same place as each generation of our ancestors." He brushes the pad of his thumb across her knuckles. "And may Poseidon bless us with a strong, healthy calfling of our own."

Serena swallows hard, squeezing Kai's hands. She doesn't even want to think of what it might mean birthing a calfling in new waters. "I'll announce The Selection as soon as we return to the Great Hall."

Kai smiles again, then presses his forehead against hers. "I love you, Serena Moon-Shadow. And I am yours."

"I love you, too." Serena feels as though a cloud lifts her straight into his arms. "And I am yours in this world and the next."

Chapter Eleven

By the time Liam arrives, the moon has trekked halfway across the sky. He emerges from the tree line out of breath and tired, finding Kai and Serena constructing a sprawling castle in the sand.

"Is that your underwater kingdom?" Liam asks, his shadow falling across a series of towers flourishing detailed stonework.

"No," says Kai, looking up at Liam. "It's a sandcastle."

"Stop it, Kai." Serena stands to brush sand from her lap, trying to keep a smile off her face.

Liam does not hide the frown on his. "Preparations for the Undine must be goin' well, seeing as you have time for sand art."

"They are going better." Serena squares her shoulders with her brother. "Now that a group of crones have barricaded themselves in a cave, refusing to participate in The Migration. At least they are staying clear of our bustling corridors."

"Some are refusin' to go?" asks Liam. "What will that do to the… connection?"

Serena knits her eyebrows together. "I hadn't considered. I'm of the opinion everyone will be convinced to go, in one way or another."

Squatting to inspect the main castle structure, Liam runs a palm across the top to even it out. "I don't know, Serena. Maybe forcin' our will upon our people is not the way to handle this."

Serena bends to the side, allowing her untamed hair to brush across the sand as she looks at Liam upside down. "What are you implying?"

He doesn't seem to appreciate her silliness. Instead, his cheeks grow pink as he stands. "These people have lived in this one spot their entire lives. You and I are the youngest of our species. We ain't cemented into the ways of our people, but they are. They don't want to leave their damn home behind, they don't want to say goodbye to their damn stuff, and they are damned scared." Liam kicks at one of the towers, and it explodes into a shower of sand.

Kai steps forward, inserting himself in between Serena and an angry werewolf.

"Liam," Serena says, voice soft. She peers out from behind Kai. "What troubles you?"

Up until now, he has been fully immersed in preparations for The Migration and unfazed by any obstacle put before him.

He takes a deep breath, looking between Serena and Kai. "Sorry," he mumbles, glancing at the maimed castle. "But I'm gettin' pushback from some of the older wolves as well. They haven't so much as flat out refused to go yet, but I think it's comin' to that."

"What do you propose we do about it?" asks Serena, more careful with her words and her actions.

Taking a deep breath, Liam glances down at his boots until the pink drains from his face. He sits in the sand, making a point to shore up the shattered side of the castle. "Pieces of us will always be with our homes, no matter why we leave." He gestures to the rest of the castle, sturdier as a smaller structure. "The places you make for yourself along the way will always be a part of you, they build you up—just like the experiences you have and the people you meet."

Kai grasps Serena's hand and squeezes.

"I think," says Liam slowly. "We should let each Undine and each werewolf make their own decision about stayin' or goin'. Hopefully, whatever magic binds us together will… understand. But I ain't goin' to make people do somethin' they don't want to do. I ain't Alaric," Liam finishes softly, rubbing at the needle scars on the inside of his arm.

"And I'm not my father," says Serena. She catches Liam's eye. "I mean *our* father. He was always demanding."

"And stubborn," offers Kai.

"Exactly," says Serena.

"Well, that settles that," says Liam, standing up with sand caked to his pants. He glances at Kai and Serena's interlocked fingers. "Wait—what's goin' on?" He looks over his shoulder then out into the ocean. "I mean, I knew you two were together but not openly."

"I think that is about to change," says Serena, drawing strength from the heat of Kai's hand to break the news for the first time. "We wish to hold a pairing, and we want it to be on these beaches before we leave."

"Oh." Liam reverts his eyes back to the castle. His cheeks are turning pink again.

"And if we are leaving some behind, particularly the older generations who wish to stay," says Kai, "then what better way to honor them than to have a completely traditional pairing, with the blessing and protection of the werewolves."

"You’re goin' old school with this?" he asks.

Kai and Serena exchange confused glances at the phrase.

"It could work." Liam runs a hand through the stubble on his chin. "And it would be a good way to build trust between the two groups before our journey together."

"It's about all we have time for," says Serena. "Unless we want to dangle maidens from the cliffs for each werewolf to rescue." She looks up at the cliffs towering above the beach and shudders in memory.

Liam surprises her with a laugh. "That doesn't end well for anyone but us, Serena."

Kai still has his eyebrows knit together.

"The ceremonial procedures are in the archives," says Serena.

Liam rolls his eyes. "The Undine and their ceremonies and books. Takes the fun out of it if you ask me. Besides, I already know the general gist of it."

"How?" asks Kai.

"I read the book. I had a lot of time sittin' in those archives. So besides your new love affair that’s actually old news, do you have anything else to pass on?"

"Our Head Scientist wishes to speak to Darcy on her findings when she returns," says Serena.

"She flies back tomorrow night—should get home by midnight. Should we make a ceremony out of her return?" Liam teases.

Serena smiles, mostly in relief he is back to his old self. "No, but I want to be there, too. I need to keep Evandre on a short leash, as you might say."

"I most definitely would not say," says Liam. "Dog metaphors don't go over too well with the pack."

"Noted," says Serena. She looks at Kai. "Remind me to announce as much at the next Assembly."

"You have your portions of food for The Migration under control?" asks Liam.

"We think so, but of course that all depends now on how many stay and how many go."

Liam nods. "Let us know if you need us to supplement. We are more than covered in that department. And with Doug's business, we have enough boats to transport all of us plus supplies. If we have to go over land, though, that will become a problem."

"We'll see what Darcy comes back with," says Serena. "We'll meet again tomorrow at nightfall, and I'll have Evandre with me. In the meantime announce those that want to stay have my permission and get a count." Serena sighs. "By Poseidon's good graces, this will all work out."

"Poseidon's graces and a bit of luck," mumbles Liam. "Until tomorrow, your majesty." He imitates the bow of the king's guard and turns on his heels, stalking into the trees.

"We may make an Undine out of him yet," says Kai.

"Let's not even broach that subject," says Serena, turning toward the waves. "I'm going to send out a call now. I can't wait a second longer for the announcement about the pairing." She skips along wet sand, prospects of a Selection and Pairing she actually wants to participate in overshadowing the possibility that she will leave some of her Painted Maidens behind.

Webbed toes touch cold saltwater, and Serena breaks into a run, picking her knees up higher and higher until the next swell is deep enough for a dive. She jumps, bends at the waist, and streamlines her body. Plunging in, the transformation back into fins is quick enough that by the time the swell subsides, her fins are already working. Kai splashes in behind her, and Serena follows the coral-covered slope down to The Deep.

Passing a large bloom of jellyfish, Serena scoops one up and pushes it back toward Kai. Unable to dodge it because he is looking away, Kai is punished with a sharp sting. He wags his finger at Serena, silently chastising her for playing games common amongst caste mates. She smiles back, but her mood has dampened. There are no more caste mates —the last of the school-age Undine graduated, Serena was one of them. There were none to take her place until her own caste mate, Cordelia, gave her life to birth a son.

And how will the newborn fair during The Migration? Serena wonders. Hopefully Darcy's theory that they might do better together will help them cope with the stress of travel.

Undine working the coral fields come into view, with the guards watching their backs not far away. The Queen’s Guard, highly proficient in

marksmanship with their arrows and trained to use their tridents to defend their people against any threat, is now relegated to cafeteria duty.

Serena's somber mood deepens. Playtime with Kai is over, and as much as she has to look forward to with him, she needs to focus on the problems of her people. She opens her mouth and calls to them. Elongated whistles studded throughout with clicks—it is Serena's echolocation signal, but she knows her call is well recognized by all of Society now, whether emitted above or below the water.

The sound comes back to her, and with it Serena can see the detailed patterns and vibrant colors each maidens' scales boast. Heads turn and tails angle their fins to follow Serena—her call is irresistible to her subjects. By the time she emerges from the entrance pool to the caves, more than half the Undine population is behind her.

Walking down the corridor, Serena continues to sing. Up ahead, Murphy stands guard at a fork in the hallway, his trident rigid by his side. He gestures to the right—this is where the elderly maidens have barricaded themselves. Serena doesn't follow the hallway to the closed-off cave, but stands her ground at the fork.

Changing her harmony to appeal to a different generation, her melody follows the tune of an ancient song. Gradually, Serena adds words only the long-standing members of Society can remember. Deep bass-like notes thrum out from the end of the hallway. The crones send their answer.

We are coming, my queen.

Serena turns away but does not cease her song. It follows her into the Great Hall, where she opens up her throat and pushes more air out from her lungs. Keeping her pitch high, Serena makes it obvious her song is missing something. It is only balanced once the group of crones, delayed by their own barricade, enter the Great Hall. Aged vocal chords add a weathered flavor to the melody. It is a balance of young and old—fresh notes supported by a confident beat.

The song ends after one last reverberating note. Serena stands at her throne with the crones in front of her on the mid-platform. She runs her eyes over them and they give a slow curtsey in response.

"I understand you wish to stay behind, instead of embarking on The Migration with the rest of Society," says Serena.

"Yes, your majesty," one gravelly voice rings out as the eldest of the group takes a shaky step forward. "We don't—"

Serena holds up one hand, cutting off the crone. "You don't owe an explanation. But you are aware of the invisible thread that binds us together? Separating from the group will not be pleasant."

"We are aware, your majesty, and will swear as much to Poseidon if needed." The crone removes a sharp instrument from her hair and presses it into her pockmarked skin. In the old ways, swearing to Poseidon always requires a blood oath.

"That will not be necessary," Serena's voice rings out. "I give permission, for those who wish it, to stay behind."

A collective gasp runs through the crowd. From the corner of her eye, Serena can even see the Queen's Guard look at one another in an unprecedented break in decorum. Council members who weren't given the time to take their place on the mid-platform now push their way through the crowd.

Nerin is one of them. "Your majesty, council has not been given the opportunity to advise you on this matter."

"And I thank council for their concern," says Serena. "But the decree is made."

Nerin nods her head, then moves slowly and stiffly to stand by Serena's side.

"Each maiden should know that The Migration will be dangerous. However, as our food supply runs short and falls under peril, which only increases with every passing day, it is far more detrimental to stay here in the sea of our ancestors." Serena watches the faces before her. Many look to each other and several hands join as they are faced with the sudden prospect that Society may split apart. Standing up from her throne, Serena picks up her trident, clacking Dagon against the ground. Everyone's attention snaps back to her. "I expect any Undine wishing to stay behind announce their decision within the week."

Maybe my father was on to something with his no nonsense attitude during Assembly, Serena thinks.

"Before we leave for The Migration, there is one other ceremony we must carry out." Serena softens her voice causing maidens to lean in. "We will hold a traditional pairing on our beaches."

"Traditional, your majesty?" asks Evandre. The exasperation in her voice is pronounced. "As in werewolves?"

"As in protectors," Serena says. "We will hold The Selection before the next full moon, and it will be open for any maiden to participate."

"My queen, I must protest—"

"In order to assuage any fears the wolves' presence may create," Serena interrupts. "I, myself, will be participating." Her eyes bore through Evandre. "I know you will not work to contradict my desire to take part in this ancient ceremony, Evandre, and I thank you for that."

Chapter Twelve

The swim to the archives goes quickly, with high tide pushing Serena through the narrow tunnel. Once she hits the wide entrance pool, she forces her transformation into legs, rolling her body in a dolphin-like kip. Having lost some speed with the transformation, her body crests the surface just enough so she can land on the platform. But instead of hitting jagged cave rock, there is a splash. Water covers the platform up to her knees.

She looks up. Robes hanging from the hooks move with the push of the tide, the hemmed material at the bottom soaked through.

"Mariam?" Serena calls as she enters the archives. She lifts a foot over the lipped doorway that should be plenty high enough to stop encroaching water. The ocean is gushing over as though there is no obstacle at all. "Mariam?" Serena calls again.

"Serena – thank Poseidon. Come help me over here!"

Following Mariam's voice through shelves of books, Serena wades through ankle-deep water.

"Careful!" Mariam says. "Don't splash them."

"Oh, sorry." Serena drops to her knees, causing even more of a splash, and tries to wipe at the water spots on the books with her wrist.

"Oh never mind that. Help me get these books out of the way." Frantically collecting hardbacks off of the lowest shelf, Mariam throws them in lopsided stacks on higher shelves.

Mariam pauses to rub at her lower back. Looking behind her, Serena realizes the older woman has already done two long rows. "I could go back to the open ocean and call for help," Serena offers as she scoops up an armful of seaweed encyclopedias.

"I don't want to risk water damage to any more books," says Mariam, getting back to work. "The tide should start receding within the hour. Let's finish this section."

Soon, water ceases to rush into the archives. What is left lies in stagnant pools on the floor.

Mariam and Serena finish moving the last of the wet books, then sink to the ground with sore backs.

"Are you okay, Mariam?" Serena asks.

The archives master looks to be on the verge of crying.

Instead of tears, laughter comes. "I am a mermaid librarian. What did I expect?" She shakes her head, allowing her hands to go limp by her side. "I was so worried about the wolves above me, maybe clawing their way through the sun shafts… " she glances up at the ceiling, "that I didn't even notice the ocean creeping up behind me."

"You talked about taking measurements, and keeping track. I remember."

Mariam shrugs. "Didn't get around to it. But I've never seen the water above the platform—never."

"The combination of high tide, the stormy season, and rising seas probably helped," offers Serena.

"Thank you for your assistance," Mariam stands, offering a hand to Serena. "I could never imagine asking your father to do such a thing."

Serena laughs. "Bound to his tail as he was, my father couldn't even make it this far in the archives." Her laughter fades as they walk in silence. "I came because I called Assembly and made an announcement. Well, several, in fact."

"Murphy was already here, delivering the news," Mariam says. "And inspecting. I don't think he likes the look of those sun shafts, either." She turns her back to Serena, busying herself with the catalogued tracking system.

"He told you about each maiden having a choice in The Migration?" Serena asks.

Mariam makes a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat, but she doesn't turn to look at Serena. "I'm going to have to find entire sections a new permanent home," she mumbles, continuing to rearrange cards in the catalogue.

"I told those who want to stay to let me know at the next Assembly. Not that you need to be there, though it may be—" Serena cuts herself off when she sees Mariam's hunched shoulders. "Mariam?"

Finally, the archives master turns to look at Serena. "Right. I won't be there. I'll just tell you now." Mariam takes a deep breath. "I choose to stay."

Serena feels as though her breath has been stolen. She rounds her lips to ask the question *what*, but only a squeak comes out.

"Look around you, Serena. This is my life. How could I leave my books in the clutches of high tide?"

Hands going to her midsection, Serena forces herself to speak. "I… can't leave you. Food is sparse, and your health will deteriorate. You'll die!"

Mariam sets down the cards in her hand and steps toward Serena. "We all die, Serena. And in the end, the only thing that matters is what we leave behind. This" —she holds out her arms wide— "is my life's work. And I will see it through to the end."

Tears sting the corners of Serena's eyes. She shakes her head. "I take it back—all of it. I'll say everyone has to go. And we'll find a way to transport your books. Every last one of them."

Mariam closes the distance between them and wraps Serena in a tight hug. Burying her face in Mariam's shoulder and hair, sobs rack Serena's body. When she can finally speak, she looks at Mariam with a tear-streaked face. "You've been my friend and my mentor for as long as I can remember. *I'm* your life's work. Will you not go with me?"

It sounds selfish, even to Serena, but right now she will say anything to keep Mariam with her.

Mariam smiles at Serena, pushing stray strands of jet black hair away from her face. "Serena—I couldn't be more proud of the maiden you've become. You are queen now. And you face harder choices than any leader before you. But you are making the right decision."

Serena sucks in a shaky breath but nods.

"Let me make this decision for myself," says Mariam. "I'm sure there will be others, and we will take care of each other. Now, let's talk about The Pairing. Is Kai pressuring you into this? Because I will have words—"

"No, Mariam." Serena releases her mentor to wipe her cheeks dry, trying to calm herself. "It was my idea."

Mariam stares at Serena with her dark-brown eyes. Serena knows the look well—it exudes innocence, trust, but demands honesty at the same time.

"So you are ready?" Mariam asks.

"I am ready to take Kai as my mate for life," says Serena. Her voice is no longer shaky.

Mariam persists in her questions anyway. "Are you yielding to pressure from your status as queen? You are young yet… and have time. Don't feel

like you have to grow up all at once."

Serena pauses to think about her friend's question. "I am the youngest Undine. But I am also the queen. The thought has crossed my mind—how could I truly know what it means to be Undine, and how could I make the right decisions for Society if I haven't undergone one of our most sacred rituals myself?" Serena bites her lip, looking at Mariam.

Mariam remains silent, her eyes prod Serena to answer the question herself. Serena is thankful for the safe reprieve in which to talk.

"But it isn't about what everyone else has done or is doing," says Serena. "And it isn't about growing up or proving myself. Even if The Selection and The Pairing were completely private matters, I'd still want it." Serena looks down, wiggling her toes in a puddle of water. "It is about the way Kai makes me feel. With him by my side I feel stronger—more independent. He lifts me up." Serena smiles, remembering their surfing tunnel. "He makes me a better me. He is my anchor and my best friend. And I am ready to share myself with him."

When Serena looks at Mariam, the archives master exhibits the same smile Serena holds.

"I've seen that much myself," says Mariam. "I just wanted to make sure you've seen it, too. I'm so happy for you, dear."

"Thank you, Mariam." Serena steps closer for another quick hug, then clears her throat. "So, um, do you have any knowledge or advice for me during The Pairing—or anything that comes after?" Serena remembers Mariam's words. *I am staying.* Her throat closes up at the thought.

"Knowledge? Yes, of course. I have an entire library of knowledge. But who is to say that any of that can translate into good advice for the youngest Undine, who has stunned Society by all she has accomplished as Werewolf Liaison and then as queen? You forge your own path, Serena—you always have."

"Right," says Serena. "And I'm about to forge it straight away from you."

"No more of that. I will not have you doubting yourself because of my choice to stay," Mariam's voice turns hard. "But there is one thing I want to tell you about The Pairing."

Serena lifts her eyebrows in interest.

"The first time can be many things. It can be thrilling, awkward, or downright painful. It is different for everyone, and I want you to be

prepared. Just know that a pairing is meant to improve with time, trust, and communication."

"Thank you, Mariam."

Though Mariam is more than twice Serena's age, the mentor has always spoken to Serena with candid respect. It is time to return the favor.

"And I will honor your wish to stay, and give you anything you need to survive," says Serena.

"As long as it doesn't put those on The Migration at risk, of course," interjects Mariam.

"Of course," says Serena after pausing only slightly. "Now, point me to the books on The Pairing. The werewolves will be there, and I need to know their role."

"Old school, huh?" Mariam smiles.

The phrase catches Serena off guard, but then again, Mariam did spend a lot of time with Liam when he was held in the archives.

Mariam turns to the catalogues, opens a drawer toward the bottom, and pulls a card. "I always did appreciate the presence of the werewolves at The Pairing. Makes it more exciting—heightens the experience." Mariam winks at Serena, waving the card in the air. "Follow me, dear."

Chapter Thirteen

"Why must we stand here? You are their queen. Their… habitat is yours." Evandre taps her fingers impatiently at her hip as both she and Serena stand on the beach looking out into the dark forest.

Liam is late meeting them tonight, but especially with another Undine, Serena insists they be escorted into the camp. "We will wait to be invited to their home. It is a sign of respect. How can they come to respect me if I do not respect them?"

Evandre turns up her nose. "Your father would not be left waiting. He would be bold—march straight into that camp and bellow his demands."

"My father could not walk as a result of some of the very bold choices he made." Despite her insistence on patience, Serena gives Evandre an irritated look. "Besides, I am not my father."

"That you are not," mumbles Evandre.

Shrubbery rustles in front of them, putting an end to the argument. Liam emerges from the trees, dressed in his bowling alley shirt and ripped jeans. His eyes hop from Serena to Evandre and back again.

"May I present Liam of Clan Werich, brother to the queen." Serena smiles. It is a playful jab at Liam. "And this—"

"Evandre," says Liam. "I could hear her whine from a distance." Liam shoots back with his own jab.

Evandre frowns.

"Evandre Sea-Bird," Serena says, pushing propriety back into the conversation. Serena needs this meeting to go well. "She serves as the Head Scientist for the Undine."

Evandre lifts her chin, her ego slightly recovered. "I apologize for my tone, earlier," she tells Liam. "I am not used to waiting, especially in a place that has had such petrifying connotations for us for so long."

"Understood, Head Scientist of the Undine," Liam adopts a formal tone, and Serena can't tell if he still mocking Evandre. "But we are here to change all that, aren't we?" He holds out his elbow for her to take.

"Yes, I suppose we are." Slowly, Evandre raises her fingertips to rest her hand inside Liam's arm. Serena watches the pair of them walk into the woods before she follows, wishing she could paint the scene in the caves

below just to remember it. Serena keeps her distance, trailing Liam and Evandre to camp, hoping the pair can find some common ground.

"Here we are," says Liam, holding back a leafy branch for the Undine maidens.

The first trailer comes into view, and it is one of the worst Serena has seen. Siding hangs off in sheets, duct tape—perhaps a temporary fix—blowing in the breeze.

"You… live here?" Evandre asks, the corners of her mouth turned down in distaste.

"Well, not that one. I'm on the other side. Wanted to get as far away from Alaric as I could. That there is Danny's trailer," says Liam.

As they pass the dilapidated structure, the sound of hammer on metal rings out.

"Sounds like Ronan's armory," says Evandre.

"He is doing somethin' with those poles." Liam looks at Serena.

"Something" —Evandre puts the emphasis on the ending of the word—"good I hope."

Serena pauses. "Maybe we should check."

"Let's not bother him," says Liam, urging the maidens along. "He announced his intentions to stay and others have been givin' him a hard time about it. Come on. Darcy's trailer is right over here."

Liam ascends three steps and knocks.

"More waiting," Evandre mumbles, fingernails tapping her hip again—the clicking noise grates on Serena's nerves.

The rapid reverberation of several pairs of running feet get louder and louder until the door bursts open. Evandre gasps, stumbling back in surprise as two young boys launch themselves at Liam.

Letting out a deep-throated guffaw, Liam lurches backward. He lands on his behind—the boys squeal in delight as they pounce on Liam's chest. Evandre stands behind them, eyes wide with her hands clutched tightly together over her chest.

"Ruffians!" shouts Evandre. "Stand back, my queen."

"Evandre, calm yourself. They are only wrestling," Serena explains.

One boy has both arms wrapped around Liam's neck while the other is attempting to wrangle his legs.

"Ow—no biting!" says Liam.

"Ruffians, indeed," Darcy's voice rings out from the top of the stairs. She leans against the rickety railing wiping her hands on a dishtowel. Small wrinkles form around the corners of her eyes as she smiles down at Liam. "Okay, enough torturing your uncle. Inside, boys."

"Go on now. Listen to your mom. Isn't it past your bedtime?" Liam nudges one boy to the door while picking the other up off the ground by his shirt.

"Hi, Aunt Serena!" they escape Liam's grasp to wrap their arms around Serena's waist.

She laughs, holding her hands up to ensure Evandre they mean no harm.

"I said now!" Darcy shouts.

The boys yelp at their mother's command, but she whips them playfully with a towel as they run past. "Come on in," she gestures to Liam, Serena, and Evandre. "Make yourself at home. I'll just put them to bed, and I'll be with you. Colin's at the alley." She sets a baby monitor on the round kitchen table. "Ervin is asleep."

Darcy's guests shuffle in and sit around the monitor—it plays a repeating lullaby. Evandre sits with her back stiff and her hands folded on the table in front of her. She turns down Liam's offer of drinks and food while they listen to Darcy running through the nighttime routine with her boys.

"I'm sorry about that," Darcy says, coming back into the kitchen after most of the rambunctious sounds from the back of the trailer die out. Her shirt now dons a toothpaste stain down the front. "I'm Darcy." She nods at Evandre across the table. "And you've met two of my four little heathens."

"They are quite… wonderful," says Evandre, clearly at a loss for how else to explain them.

"Thank you. They aren't always this crazy, but I think the move has them on edge." Darcy's hands flit around the room at the boxes, some half-filled, some stuffed and taped.

"Are you taking all of it with you?" asks Serena, casting a nervous glance at Liam. They've talked several times about how difficult it will be to bring personal effects.

Darcy sighs. "Almost all of it is going to storage. Until we figure out what to do with it."

"What did you find out on your trip?" Serena asks.

"Okay." Darcy retrieves a folder from the counter. She spreads it open in the middle of the table and notes, maps, and pictures scatter. "I narrowed it down to three places before I left, all accessible by water. I picked secluded but protected lands, with water that best matches salinity, acidity, and temperature to here—or as best match as I could find with my limited research methods."

"Which are?" asks Evandre.

"That," says Darcy, pointing to the corner of the room.

Serena and Evandre both squint. It is a square box with a screen on one side.

"Here are the samples I brought back for you." Darcy produces a small box from under the table and opens it. Corked vials fill the box. "A dozen water samples from each location. Yours for the taking." Darcy winks at Evandre.

"Thank you. I will begin tests right away." Evandre fills the waterproof satchel tied around her waist. "We should know if any of these places are habitable by the next moon, your majesty."

Serena almost flushes at the formal title in such an informal setting.

"Which places did you find?" asks Liam.

"All up north in Alaska," says Darcy, unfolding a larger map. "Here, here, and here."

"The U.S.?" ask Liam. "We don't know much about their government."

Darcy shrugs. "I'm hoping that doesn't matter, if we stay secluded enough."

The door to the trailer home slams open, and everyone hops back from the table, heads swinging toward the entrance. Colin stomps in. "Darcy!"

Serena is beginning to think Cordelia's baby can sleep through anything.

"Great Poseidon, woman," says Evandre. "How many heathens do you have?"

"One too many, apparently," says Darcy, stepping toward Colin. "Excuse me a moment."

Darcy and her husband leave the trailer, shutting the door behind them. Hushed whispers buzz in through thin walls.

"Are you sure it's him?" asks Darcy. "How do you know?"

"He answered all the questions right when I quizzed him about the old man," answers Colin.

Serena and Liam exchange glances, their interest peaking.

"Well you can't let him in—not with the mermaids here."

Serena automatically looks at Liam. "We can leave out the back."

"Hold on," he says, standing up from the table. "Let me see what this is all about."

Poking his head out the door, Liam exchanges more hushed whispers. Finally, he looks back at Serena, excitement lighting his eyes. "It's Cecil's lawyer. He has a will."

Chapter Fourteen

"Put them on." Liam hands Serena and Evandre both a long-sleeved jacket, then turns off most of the lights in the room.

Holding the jacket up between two fingers, Serena looks at Liam. "Or I can just retract my scales."

Liam shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. Your skin still has a bluish tint to it. There's nothin' we can do about your face—maybe he'll think you are in some exotic stage show."

"What about me?" asks Evandre. She already has the jacket on and is scratching at the itchy material on her arms.

Studying her elder with renewed interest, Serena has to admit Evandre's cheeks and the sharp lines at her jaw have a strong purple hue.

Staring, Liam finally shrugs. "I don't know. You can pass for a carnie, maybe."

"Everyone ready?" Colin asks, holding the door open.

Mumbles of hesitant agreement sound off around the table.

"Good," he says. "May I present Mr. Donelly."

A thin man in a dark suit with a stiff white shirt buttoned up to his neck appears in the doorway. "Oh." He looks startled as his eyes flit around the room. They come to rest on Serena and Evandre, and he lifts one finger to point. "You are…" he trails off as his finger curls back into his palm, and his thumb extends, pointing to the waves sounding in the distance behind him.

Serena gives a cautious nod. "As you say."

Mr. Donelly swallows hard. "Let's get this over with. Liam, I presume?"

"Yeah." Liam steps forward. "Let me guess, the old man is still ordering me around."

"I'm not sure I would call it that," says Mr. Donnelly. "More like helping you." He takes a seat at the table, glancing up at Serena and Evandre again.

Mr. Donnelly stares at the pair of Undine until Liam sits beside him. "May I present Serena Moon-Shadow and Evandre Sea-Bird."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," Mr. Donnelly mumbles, but the words sound strangled, and they come out in a high squeak. He clears his throat. "Cecil left everything in joint custody to Liam and Serena. His

house, his business, and this… " Mr. Donnelly takes a small, locked box out of his bag, placing it on the table. "Here is the key. I don’t know what’s inside. Though I was informed it is necessary for both species survival."

Liam takes the key, turns it over in his hand once, then inserts it into the lock on the box.

"Please don't open it now!" says Mr. Donnelly. "I prefer not to be present. I don't need any more information about this situation than I already have." He takes a deep breath and pulls a stack of papers out next, sliding them toward Liam. "Sign here."

The room falls silent as Liam's pen scratches across paper after paper. Serena keeps catching Mr. Donnelly's eye and self-consciously pulls her sleeves down to her wrists.

Liam signs the last paper and pushes the stack and the pen toward Serena. Her eyes hop from the pen up to Liam and down to the papers.

"A simple X will do, right next to Liam's signatures," says Mr. Donnelly.

Pinching the pen between her forefinger and thumb, Serena fumbles as she draws an X on each page.

Once she finishes the last page, Mr. Donnelly scoops up the documents and stuffs them into his briefcase. "I thank you for your time, and I do apologize for not coming sooner, but trust me, I believe everything Cecil told me, which is probably why my first instinct is to run in the other direction." He zips up his briefcase, stands, and pauses. "The only reason I am here now is because I heard about them closing down the trailer park. I can't imagine your lot loose in the towns. Thought I should do something about that before my big move." He turns and walks toward the door.

Darcy holds it open for him, the dishtowel clutched tightly to her chest.

"Where are you moving?" asks Serena.

He stops at the door, turning his head slightly. "To a landlocked country, Ms. Moon-Shadow. Somewhere very far away from any ocean." Mr. Donnelly reaches into his pocket and produces a small slip of paper. "Here is my card." He hands it to Darcy. "But don't come visit me. Just call if you have any questions."

After Darcy shuts, then locks, the door behind Mr. Donnelly, all heads turn toward the box on the table.

"Do you think it's a bomb?" asks Colin.

"Please—this is Cecil we're talking about," Liam growls at Colin. "He raised us."

"Cecil was the human that kept our sons?" Evandre asks.

Liam nods, all of them circling around the table.

"I left my son with him," she says.

Every pair of eyes in the room is glued to the box. No one dares look at Evandre.

"Do you know which of us he is?" asks Liam, his voice almost a whisper.

Evandre shakes her head, swallowing hard. "We gave him the transformation potion, but he did not survive it. It was in the very early days, even before Alaric. We didn't have the potion right—not in time for my boy, anyway."

Running her hand over the box, Evandre smiles. "The human left his windows open that night."

Liam frowns. "Cecil never left his windows open."

"That night he did." The smile dies from her face. "Because I was singing. I was singing to keep him alive, and the human knew it."

"Your songs are very powerful," Darcy speaks up. She looks at Serena. "Yours helped my boy."

"Well." Evandre breathes in and stands straight. "Are we going to open this thing or shall we break into song right now?"

"Right—here goes," says Liam, inserting the key and unlocking the box. He pulls out a mess of paperwork, flipping through it. "Titles, business documents, official papers makin' sure everything is in our name, Serena."

"Won't do us much good," Serena says. "We're leaving."

"I can at least give the trailer to Danny. Maybe he'll pick up the business and continue to keep tourists away from your maidens that are staying behind."

Serena nods, a lump forming in her throat. If she is going to leave Mariam behind, at least her friend will be as safe as possible.

"And…" Liam pulls out a map, rolled in a cylinder tube with a rubber band around it. "It looks like he left us something much more important."

"What could be more important than…?" Serena trails off as Liam snaps the band and unfolds the map.

A vial of water comes out with it. Rolling across the table, Evandre stops it right before it crashes to the floor. "It looks like one of yours, Darcy," she says.

"What is that old man up to?" Darcy eyes the vial then leans over the map. "Will you look at that? He’s already picked a place for us."

"Where?" Serena and Liam ask in unison.

"A place called Ivvavik National Park—on the northern border of Canada, right next to Alaska. I didn't consider it because it would be a long migration. We'd have to skirt all the way around Alaska." Darcy stands, furrowing her eyebrows in thought.

"But he's made arrangements," says Liam, reading a note from Cecil that was tucked into the map. "Ivvavik National Park is only accessible by aircraft. There are no roads leadin' there—it is very secluded. And it appears as though his cousin works there." Liam looks up at the group. "He says it's safe for us."

"I'll test the water," Evandre says, peering at the tube.

Liam nods. "And I can correspond with his cousin. He left contact info."

"Wait a minute guys." Colin is flipping through more of the paperwork. "Cecil left some research notes. It looks like he has some ideas of the pack splitting and cutting whatever is binding us together."

"Oh?" Liam lowers the papers he is looking at. He exchanges glances with Serena.

"He thinks if both sides have an Alpha, the pack can split without any pain." Colin looks at Liam, excitement flashing through his eyes. "I wonder if Danny would still be willing to take the job?"

"I'll talk to him." Liam turns and starts pacing. "This could work. This could all work out thanks to Cecil."

"Wait…" Colin is scanning the page further. "He thinks not just the pack, but also the Undine need an Alphas—one to cover each side. That’s the only way the split will work."

"It makes sense," says Evandre. "All along the Undine and the werewolves have both had an Alpha. They counter each other. Well, I suppose until Serena took on both rolls."

"Which can easily be remedied," offers Serena.

Liam's eyes snap to hers, and she feels a tinge of sheepishness for it. She looks down at the map, running her finger around the borders of the

protected land. The park is almost four thousand square miles and sits right on the Arctic Ocean. "Ivvavik," mutters Serena. "I wonder what that means."

Colin turns Cecil's research notes in his hand, showing Serena. "In the local aboriginal language, it means 'a place to give birth'."

Chapter Fifteen

When Serena enters the Great Hall, trailed by Evandre, energy and excitement hums through both their bodies. They walk to the front quickly, smiling at each other as they go. Other members of the council stand toward the front of the massive cavern, raising their eyebrows in interest.

Serena leans toward Evandre. "Let's not announce what happened quite yet. Test the water and make sure it is compatible."

Evandre nods, a gratified smile on her face.

"You have news for the council?" Nerin asks as soon as the pair of maidens approaches.

"We might, but I've asked Evandre to confirm some facts first," says Serena.

Evandre lets out the quietest, shortest squeal beside Serena. But Nerin misses nothing, and wide eyes gawk at Evandre.

"Very well," says Nerin. "The Selection is to begin shortly, anyway."

Evandre's shoulders sag a little when her important task is brushed off so easily.

The sounds of chattering, webbed feet brushing over hard rock, and fingers running through hair in a final attempt to prune enter the Great Hall. It grows louder as more maidens, and then the Queen’s Guard enter, Murphy marching his formation straight to the front. Standing in a group with the council, Serena watches Kai at the back of the formation. Her stomach tightens into knots. The Selection is about to begin. With the reading of Cecil's will, Serena hasn't had a chance to even think about The Selection or The Pairing—until now.

Kai frowns at Serena, and she realizes she is biting her lip. He shakes his head in disapproval, much like Nerin would, but he looks determined to do something about Serena's mood. Keeping the rhythm of the guards' march, Kai lifts his feet higher and higher, legs straight so he is goose-stepping down the Great Hall. It is the old way of marching, and it looks so awkward it was a wonder they ever did it at all. When Murphy calls the guard to a halt, Kai rears back his leg in an over-dramatic attempt to stop himself. He spins once and does a pony hop as the other guard members are clacking their heels together.

A smile wide on her face, and barely able to hold back laughter, Serena mouths the words '*thank you'* to Kai. He lifts his legs in quick sequence, as if he is jumping over an obstacle, then bows to the queen. His endeavor to lighten the atmosphere in an otherwise stressful ceremony has worked—several maidens giggle in tight groups.

"Will you take the throne, your majesty?" Nerin asks. Even her words have a softer edge to them.

"Yes, of course." Serena turns toward the looming throne but pauses. "Evandre, unless you wish to participate, you are excused from the ceremony."

"Thank you," Evandre says with a more respectful curtsey than Serena has ever seen the maiden give. "I shall report my findings as soon as I have them."

As Evandre leaves the Great Hall, the last of the maidens filter in, and Serena takes her seat. The council arranges itself on one side of the mid-platform opposite the guards. Once everyone quiets, heads begin to turn toward Serena. She clears her throat and sets her trident against her throne. "Will the maidens who wish to be considered for The Selection please step forward?"

There are subtle shifts in the crowd as maidens attempt to squeeze their way to the front of the Great Hall. Simone is one of the first. Serena narrows her eyes as the maiden previously paired with Kai takes the first spot in line. Simone does not glance at Kai or Serena—she keeps her eyes trained directly forward. No one else from the Temporal Caste steps forward, but several other maidens of various ages do.

"Very well." Serena gives her approval of the six maidens in front of her. "I—"

Serena cuts off as movement from the council catches her attention. Hailey steps forward. Serena's eyes go wide, and she can't help but glance at Murphy. There is only one reason Hailey would participate in The Selection. Her face is flushed as she takes her place at the end of the line. Standing beside Serena, Nerin has gone very still as her eyes dart in between her son and Hailey.

Before Nerin can say anything, Serena stands. "Let The Selection begin," she bellows.

The maidens in line jump at her words.

Damn it, Serena thinks as she sits back down. The tension that Kai managed to ease is slowly slipping back into the room. She looks at the Undine Maidens lined up in front of the throne. Many are fidgeting, with their fingers constantly in motion rubbing at the scales on their hips. Even those who have stood through The Selection before are nervous. No one looks happy.

Serena frowns. If The Selection and The Pairing are successful, these women will endure the hardship of a changing body as calflings grow inside them, then the difficulties of birth. They will face possible death, as many have before, or worse—the death of their calfling. There might still be the decision they all face if their calfling is born a weak male. Would they give them the potion?

Heat washes over Serena. This feels all wrong, but it is the way it's been done for generations. She feels powerless to stop it.

At Murphy's nod, the first of the Undine guards step forward. It is Morven, the biggest one. Almost simultaneously each of the maiden's eyes go wide, then shoot to the ground in front of them.

"Stop!" Serena shouts. Her voice snaps throughout the cavern as though the former king himself just clacked his trident against the ground.

Every head in the Great Hall turns toward her. She stands from the throne slowly. "I will not have my maidens cowering in fear as they wait to be inspected and picked up like seashells in the sand." Serena scans the line of maidens as she speaks. They raise their eyes in interest.

"They are worth more than that," Serena continues, her voice softer. "And they must go into The Pairing knowing the value of themselves."

Now she looks at the guards. Morven has paused mid-step, one foot still raised.

"I decree The Painted Maidens shall select their mate themselves. And after tonight, The Selection will no longer be a public ceremony. Parties may confer in private whenever they feel ready. They shall report their intent to pair only so that we can arrange appropriate protection on the beach." Serena finds herself on the mid-platform, having descended the stairs as she speaks. She is eye to eye with the line of maidens in front of her. "Do any maidens participating in tonight's Selection wish to withdraw from the line due to the change in ceremony?"

They each shake their heads no. A new kind of excitement jitters through them as they shift from one foot to another, glancing over at the

guards.

Serena turns to the male Undine. "Do any of the Queen's Guard wish to withdraw their eligibility from The Maiden's Selection?"

Most of them shake their head no, but Morven slowly lowers his foot as his opposite hand rises into the air—just as slowly. "Apologies, your majesty, but I'm not—"

"No apologies are necessary," interrupts Serena. "You may stand by my throne, Morven."

Her dismissal is not harsh. In fact, standing next to the throne is a place of honor usually reserved for the Queen's Second and the Head of the Guard himself.

"As you say, your majesty." Morven bows and jogs up the steps toward the throne. Nerin offers her own spot, then goes to stand with the council. Morven does a perfect about face then comes to rest, his chest heaving with pride.

"Anyone else?" Serena asks.

"Your majesty," one more guard, the one standing beside Kai, steps forward and bows. "I will also request to abstain from the ceremony."

"And so it will be. Please take your place by my throne."

The guard bows again. As he dips his head, Serena catches Kai's eyes. All at once, she realizes what her own decree is going to mean for her. She will have to select him.

She turns to Assembly, mouth dry. "We will perform this last rite of passage to honor our ways of old before The Migration. The ceremony has been blessed by our elders."

The aged maidens who stand toward the front of Assembly nod their heads.

"Given the change of ceremony, does the court still have your blessing?" Serena asks them.

There is a moment of tense silence, then one steps forward from the group. "I should've liked to seen it done such a way in my days," she says, her voice deep and scratchy with age. The rest murmur in agreement.

"Thank you," says Serena, breathing a sigh of relief.

Surveying the maidens before her, Serena works a bit of moisture back into her mouth. Her eyes come to rest on Simone, standing at the end of the line. She remembers the snarky smile on Simone's face when Kai chose her at the last Selection, after Serena made it clear she wasn't ready.

There is no way I'm going to take a chance this time, she thinks. *I am the queen, damn it.*

Stepping forward, Serena lifts her chin. "Very well—let The Selection begin."

Before the echo of her words bounces back, Serena performs a right pivot worthy of the Queen's Guard and takes quick strides toward Kai. Her fingers jitter and her vision blurs as nervous tears spring to her eyes.

Don't think about it. Just do it.

Her pace quickens. She doesn't want to give herself the chance to back out of this. But when she meets his eyes, warmth envelops her body, and her beating heart calms. With locked gazes, Serena stops in front of Kai. She curtsies and he returns the gesture with a bow—then they step forward and come together.

"You will have me?" Serena asks.

Kai nods, swallowing hard. His lips form the word 'yes' but barely a sound squeaks out. He appears to have lost his voice.

At least I'm not the only nervous one, she thinks.

"And I will have you," Serena says.

Their lips press together in modest kiss that lingers just long enough for Serena to revel in the taste of smoke and salt. Smiling, the couple breaks apart, Kai taking her hand. Serena falls into the line of guards by his side.

An awkward round of clapping rings out but doesn't spread among the crowd. After all the deviations in decorum, applause is asking too much.

Looking back toward the line of maidens, Serena prays to Poseidon. It is their turn now, and she hopes they will embrace the change.

Surprisingly, Hailey, the oldest of the maidens, steps out of line first. She treads toward Murphy, her footfall light and airy. Like Serena, she will not risk losing the only one she desires. Hailey stops in front of Murphy and extends her hand. Without hesitation, Murphy bends to kiss Hailey's knuckles. The union is agreed to by both parties—but instead of taking her place by Murphy's side the pair steps forward and turns to where Nerin stands with the council.

With her telltale rigid spine, the Queen's Second looks from her son to his new mate and back again. Finally, she gives the slightest nod.

Bending in unison, Murphy and Hailey graciously accept his mother's approval of their pairing, and they return to the line of guards.

The diverse manner in which the unions are being made encourage the rest of the maidens. Two step forward at the same time. After an awkward pause, they actually laugh out loud. Joining hands, they walk to the line of guards together, then separate after a brief hug and well-wishing to choose their mate. The next maiden walks toward the Queen's Guard with a slight skip in her step. That skip morphs into a prance, and the maiden finishes with a spin in front of her chosen mate. The smile on his face is wide and he responds in kind with his own tap dance, finishing with one toe forward as he takes her hand. When she wraps her fingers around his, he spins her into place by his side.

The last maiden to step forward is Simone. She doesn't glance at Kai even once. Instead, she moves to stand in front of one of the quieter guards and extends her hand to him.

He doesn't take it. "I was going to choose you during The Selection of the Temporal Caste," he says. He gives an accusatory glance to his right, not directly at Kai, but everyone knows who Kai selected in the last pairing event.

Simone doesn't break her gaze. "I'm here now," she says. Her face softens into a smile. "And this time, I am allowed to make my own choice."

Understanding blooms over the guard's face. "Thank you, Poseidon… and your majesty, for that." The guard takes Simone's extended hand, pulling her into the line next to him.

With two guards having abstained from the ceremony, every other guard is matched, and there are no remaining maidens. The Selection is complete.

Nerin steps forward from the council, a pleased smile on her face. "The couples are excused to prepare for The Pairing."

Chapter Sixteen

Kai turns toward Serena and squeezes her hand. "I'm going to go get ready. You'll be okay?"

Serena nods and forces a smile even though her nerves feel stretched too thin.

"Good." He smiles back. "I'll meet you on the beach, beautiful." He kisses her on the lips.

The warmth that floods her body is enough to anchor her. She walks the length of the Great Hall to her room, fingertips scraping the sides of the hallway.

Normally, the maidens and guards who will participate in The Pairing retire to their own caves. Family members and friends visit to give congratulations, advice, and sometimes gifts.

The Pairing has been built up into such a stressful event—no wonder they are hardly ever successful.

Serena stops in the middle of her room, glancing toward the barren entrance hallway. She does a full circle around the cavern, then glances at the hall again. It is still empty. Serena has no family, and it is doubtful anyone will be visiting, since no one is allowed in the queen's quarters. Lying back on her bed of stone, she sighs. Poseidon stares back.

"At least I have you," Serena says to the inanimate carving.

Candles begin to flicker out around the room. Serena remains staring at Poseidon. Without as much interfering light, his eyes twinkle back at her.

His long beard and square face remind her of her father, and she wonders, not for the first time, if they are related. She wonders what kind of advice her father might give right before the pairing, or if he would steer clear of the issue all together. She wonders if her father could ever be convinced to leave the place he grew up.

"Am I doing the right thing?" Serena swallows a hard lump in her throat, thinking past The Pairing to the upcoming Migration. The carvings of Poseidon will of course stay behind, and there will be no more reminders of her father.

Will I forget what he looks like?

She closes her eyes, trying to burn Poseidon's image into her brain, but lids fly open as she hears footsteps coming down her hall.

"Murphy?" she asks, scooting out from the sleeping rock.

"It is only me, your majesty." Evandre halts at the entrance to the room.

"I am sorry." Morven bows to Serena. As one of the only two guards not participating in The Pairing, he must have been posted to her quarters. "But she said she has very important news."

"Yes, your majesty." Evandre has a wide smile, as she waves a test tube in the air and steps into the room. "I have results."

"It's fine, Morven. Thank you," Serena says.

Morven bows and leaves. Serena watches as Evandre walks right over to the rock, sits down, and pats the edge for Serena to join her. Shocked at Evandre's brazen conduct, Serena slowly walks over and sits. "Have you been in here before?" she asks.

"No, I haven't." Evandre purses her lips, looking around. "It's smaller than I thought it would be."

Serena clears her throat. "You said you have news."

"Oh, yes." She looks at the vial in her hand as though it just appeared. "The water tests out okay. The pH balance more or less matches the waters here as they were thirty years ago. The water, on average, will be about ten to twenty degrees cooler, but Undine will adjust to that well enough."

"So we're going," Serena says, her voice quiet. She turns to look at Poseidon as though it will be the last time.

Evandre follows her glance, then puts her hand on Serena's shoulder. "Poseidon will grace our journey," Evandre says. "And, Serena, your father will always be with you. Tonight, for The Migration, and whatever comes after."

"Thank you, Evandre. We will need the blessing of every Undine that has passed to the afterlife. They at least know what it is to migrate."

This elicits a small smile from Evandre. She clears her throat and straightens her back. "Someone has spoken to you about what to expect during The Pairing?" Her lips go tight, as if she is preparing herself for some gruesome task.

"Mariam has," says Serena, feeling formality creep back into the atmosphere.

"Good." Evandre stands, smoothing her scales down her midsection. "If anything, Mariam is forthright and thorough."

"That she is." Serena stares at the last flickering candle.

"If I may, your majesty." Evandre looks to the hallway. "Maybe a visit to Mother Rayne would benefit you? Now is the time to be with family."

"Very well." Serena stands, allowing Evandre to lead the way without looking back. Behind them, the candle sputters out, leaving Poseidon alone in the darkness.

* * *

"Serenita." Rayne hops up from the table to greet Serena. "We weren't sure if you would come."

Across from her, Ronan stands a bit more slowly.

"And we didn't think the guards would let us in your quarters, even given the circumstances and the fact that we raised you," Rayne continues. "I had a half a mind to march in with a frying pan should they give me any grief about it."

Behind Rayne, Ronan grunts. Both he and Serena know Rayne would have done it.

"Please don't beat my guards, Mother Rayne." Serena says with a chiding eyebrow. "That would make for a very awkward trial."

"Awkward trial, indeed." Rayne crosses her arms. "As if we haven't seen enough of those already."

Ronan grunts again, then scratches his rough chin, looking at the kitchen.

"Yes, well—Ronan and I will cook dinner for you. You'll need your energy tonight, after all," says Rayne.

Blushing at the wink Rayne gives, Serena keeps her head down and follows Ronan into the kitchen hoping Rayne also doesn't feel the need to talk about The Pairing, or worse, give advice.

Thankfully, Rayne whips into action as soon as she enters her domain. She opens the storage cupboards and pulls out the coolers while Ronan lights a small fire in the cooking pit.

"Is her majesty still a vegetarian?" asks Rayne, plunging her hand deep into the cooler. Something splashes back at her.

"Yes, I am—and I'll thank you to respect as much tonight." Serena doesn't usually use such a harsh tone with her orphanage mother, but she really, really doesn't want to fight about food.

Rayne makes a quick snatch and pulls out a small, pink salmon. "The fish is for me and Ronan. We've collected enough hijki to make your favorite."

Rayne opens a large pot, and Serena can smell the makings of sea lettuce soup. Her stomach grumbles in anticipation.

"Grab the hijki, Serena. Just in that jar, on the middle shelf."

Relieved to be rid of formal titles, bows and curtsies, however temporary, Serena almost begins to sing as she fumbles through the cupboards. Finally, she finds a clear jar full of the thin, dried algae that looks like twigs. "Did everyone else eat?" asks Serena, feeling guilty that the three of them are indulging.

"Anyone that cared to show up during supper hours," Rayne says, stirring the soup. "I sent a small tray of anything we could spare for those participating in The Pairing."

Serena opens the jar and selects a crunchy stick. She lets the salty flavors roll around in her mouth as she looks about the kitchen. The cupboards designated for Migration food storage lie open too. Rayne has bundled food so each maiden will be capable of carrying her own. Serena counts the individual packages as she swallows the last of the hijki stick. "We are short a few."

She doesn't miss the quick glance that Rayne and Ronan share.

"Nerin stopped by today to inform me of two more maidens that have chosen to stay," says Rayne.

"Still short." Serena recounts just to make sure.

"Put the fish on, Ronan, or he'll barely have time to heat up." Rayne concentrates on her stirring.

"Rayne?" Serena asks, a sliver of worry gnawing at the back of her brain. Instead of waiting for the answer, Serena marches over to another cupboard and flings open the doors. This holds bundles of food for those planning to stay. They aren't nearly as big—the hope being the ecosystem will once again begin to thrive with fewer Undine picking at it. Ten bundles sit on the shelves, like stubborn barnacles that refuse to budge.

"Mariam, the seven elderly Undine who have already announced their intent to stay, plus the two more you mentioned. Who are the other two bundles for?" Serena asks.

Ronan stands up from the fire, and Rayne stops stirring. She closes the pot back up, and her shoulders hunch.

Understanding hits Serena like an iceberg. Tears automatically spring to her eyes. "No," she says, wiping away the tears because she refuses to believe it.

Ronan moves to stand by Rayne, and they both look at Serena, clasping hands.

"We didn't want to tell you until later," Rayne says.

"No," Serena repeats. "I can't leave Mariam and everything that reminds me of my father and say a final goodbye to the two people who raised me."

Rayne wipes away her own tears, then shrugs. "We would just slow everyone down, Serena. And we probably wouldn't make it."

Lifting her chin and closing her eyes, Serena swallows hard. "I cannot imagine life without either of you in it."

Serena hears shuffling, then Ronan's large arms wrap around her. The scales that have been singed and blackened until they curl back scrape at her, but the hug feels good, as though he is forcing her to pull herself together. Only when Serena's tears cease does Ronan let go. He cups her chin in his hand. "You'll be just fine, little calfling. Just fine."

"We'll speak more of it later," Rayne says. "But now, let's eat."

After the devastating news, Serena isn't able to swallow much food, even if it is sea-lettuce soup sprinkled with hijki. But Rayne doesn't nag her, and the meal is finished in relative silence. By the time the dishes are scrubbed and put away, Rayne announces it is time.

What food Serena does manage to swallow has somewhat filled the hole that gets bigger in her chest every time another Undine announces their intent to stay.

"We'll take you to the beach, if you wish," Rayne says.

"Yes." Serena nods. "I would like that. Thank you."

The swim to the beach takes longer than it should—Serena's orphanage parents are slow. At first she thinks they are just trying to prove a point, until she reminds herself she hasn't seen them actually swim in a long time.

Serena stays behind Ronan and Rayne, watching as they nudge each other when the current pushes them together. Ronan reaches out for Rayne's hand, and their fingers intertwine. Calloused palms and raw knuckles find their comfort, wrapped in the warmth of another. All at once, Serena can't wait to start her life with Kai.

Chapter Seventeen

Once Serena reaches the breaking waves, Ronan and Rayne pause. They each give her one last hug. Rayne tucks a stray strand of hair floating out from Serena's braid, and Serena swears she can hear Ronan grunt, even underwater. They nudge her forward, and Serena surfaces.

As each wave pushes against her, the transformation from Undine tail and fins to Ungainly legs takes place. The rest of the maidens participating in The Pairing stand in the water, while the guards are on the beach. They are inspecting the sand and the tree line—venturing into the forest as far as they dare. The Undine are taking their own precautions for safety. It is something the wolves should be doing, but recent fighting is still too fresh in everyone's memories.

As the guards continue to inspect, Serena glances down the line of maidens standing in the frothy water. Moonlight refracting off their colored scales shades the water around them, so they stand in a halo of their own making. Turquoise, yellow, and deep red—the colors of the painted maidens make their impression upon the ocean.

Serena notices each of the maidens in turn are looking at her—and not in a good way. Furrowed eyebrows and nervous twitches in their hands give away their agitation. It isn't until the maiden standing next to Serena begins to call forth more of her own scales that Serena realizes she is still fully scaled, and it is customary to mimic the dress of the superior present.

Sighing, Serena begins to retract her scales. Starting from the bottom, diamond-shaped plates sink into skin on her feet, ankles, and calves. The armor glows softly and Serena keeps it displayed above her knees, going to her upper thighs and above her hips.

Down the line of maidens, Simone leans forward. Her entire midsection is exposed.

Serena crosses her arms, clearly indicating she is not going that far with it.

But Simone has stuck out her bottom lip in a pout, gesturing to her mate who is on his hands and knees sifting through the sand looking for traps. She has come to impress and is determined to do so once the boys stop playing around on the beach.

Oh fine, Serena thinks. She looks down, watching as scales retract to reveal her abdomen. Aware she has put on extra weight from long hours in the throne with only the rare chance to romp around in the forest, Serena is pleasantly surprised to find a flat, toned midsection. The weight has settled in all the right places, her chest and her hips.

Maybe Nerin's constant harassment about posture has some merit.

Finally, Serena hides scales along her arms shoulders and her lower neckline, wiping away sliver-thin stripes of blood and seawater left behind. She looks at the maidens who are happily copying Serena's covering, if they weren't there already.

"You look like an angel," says Kai.

Serena turns, surprised to find him ankle-deep in the waves in front of her.

"An angel?" she asks. She looks at the other maidens standing in their circles of color. Serena is the only one without a halo.

"Your shades match the water almost perfectly tonight," says Kai. "Like an extension of the ocean herself."

He wades closer, and Serena fights to keep her breathing steady.

"The skin that shows…" Kai lays one hand on her bare shoulder while the other one wraps around her waist, "…glows. Like an angel." His fingertips run down the side of her face.

Serena can feel her cheeks heating at his touch. He moves beside her, wrapping his hand around hers. "Are you ready?" he asks.

Nodding, Serena walks forward, trusting her legs more than she does her voice. The rest of the couples follow suit until everyone stands on the beach.

"Where are the werewolves?" Serena asks. She doesn't need to look behind her to check if the moon is full and if they have the right night. Her blood tingles with the knowledge of the perfectly round orb that shines above them. It pulls at her life force as surely as it pulls at the tide.

"No sign of them yet," says Kai.

Raising her nose to the air, Serena inhales. "They are coming."

The Undine wait in nervous silence, their eyes glued to the dark forest. A breeze tousles Serena's hair and moves through the leaves before disappearing amongst thick shrubs. There is rustling in response, and Liam emerges from the shadows of the tree line, dressed in only a cape. He carries a basket of wolfsbane, the poisonous yellow flowers brimming

over the top. Once he stands in front of them, he bows, flourishing one arm out to his side.

"Hello, Serena Moon-Shadow, Queen of the Undine Kingdom and Kai Forest, Second to the Head of the Guard," Liam says. "I will be your werewolf protector this night."

Both Kai’s and Serena's mouths drop at the formality of Liam’s words and actions.

He sets down the basket. The rest of the werewolves on the beach, one per Undine pair, finish their lines addressing each couple by their full name and title.

"Did you learn every Undine's name?" asks Serena.

Liam breaks his rigid stance to step toward Serena. "With help from Evandre," he whispers. "We weren't sure which of you would be here." He steps back, gesturing to the basket again and raises his voice. "I bring you this peace offerin' and swear by my own life that no harm will befall you tonight."

Serena eyes the wolfsbane. "How did you collect the flowers without poisoning yourself?"

"We have gloves. Now, would you please let me finish?" Liam says in a hushed hiss. "We're sort of the example, here."

Serena looks to her left and right. Each of the werewolves, and in turn the Undine couple in front of them, is glancing nervously toward Serena and Liam. "Continue," says Serena.

Liam takes a deep breath and then furrows his eyebrows as if trying to remember his lines. "I will give you complete privacy, but I will be nearby should either of you call for help. We've also made private dens by bendin' trees together and drapin' vines in the tree line, should you seek further privacy from your peers."

Serena and Kai glance into the forest, just now noticing darker inlets along the line of trees.

"Or, if you prefer, we've built a small but sturdy platform on the whale rock." Liam points just past the breaking waves, where a large boulder in the shape of the majestic sea giant sits. "And I have one more gift." Liam produces a small, square package from the inside of his cape and hands it to Kai.

Kai turns over the thin blue piece in his hand. Plastic crinkles between his fingers. "What is it?"

"It's somethin' we… and the humans use, in case you prefer not to be with calflin' right now." He raises his eyebrow at Serena. "You should know, it isn't always one hundred percent effective."

Kai and Serena look at each other. When Serena opens her mouth to speak, Liam cuts her off. "It is for you two to decide once I am gone. I ain't one for details." Liam breaks his formal decorum, turns with his hands on his hips, and takes a deep breath. "This is very, very awkward for me," he mumbles. He takes another deep breath and turns again. "I will leave you now and take to my wolf form. Please do not be alarmed—it is my strongest form and will give me the best chance of protectin' you should anything occur. Which it won't." Liam gives an extra nod as if he is trying to reassure himself. "Thank you for givin' me your trust, and may Poseidon grace your union." With that, Liam turns on his heel and walks toward the trees, untying his cape.

Pulling at the final string that holds the cape together, he catches it by both ends and holds it out wide. Liam bends until his entire body is shielded, and the cape shudders. When it drops to the ground, he is already in his wolf form.

"Liam!" Serena calls.

The wolf pauses and turns.

"We thank you for your protection this night." Serena isn't sure if the words are part of the formalities or not, she didn't get a chance to read the book, though it is obvious Liam did.

The wolf bows his muzzle to the sand, then vanishes among the shadows of the trees.

Chapter Eighteen

After Liam disappears, Serena and Kai glance at the other couples. Their wolves have already left them, and some are making their way into the dens in the tree line.

"A few will stay on the beach, but spread out. And some will go into the breaking waves, where they can be with the earth and the ocean," says Kai, glancing out over the water. Both their gazes fall on the whale rock. "No one has gone to the platform yet…" he glances at Serena.

"I'm not sure I can," says Serena, remembering the gruesome scene of the last battle.

She shivers and Kai wraps his arms around her. "Wherever you want," he says.

Serena glances out at the ocean again. "Come on." She takes his hand and pulls him into the breakers. He still holds the basket of wolfsbane flowers in his other hand.

"Here?" Kai asks, once Serena stops as the crest of a small wave tickles the backs of their knees.

"Remember when you let me glide on top of the water, wrapped in a breaking wave?" she asks.

Kai nods.

"Here, where the ocean meets the earth…" She pauses, bracing for a stronger swell that crashes against her body. Instead of knocking her over, it curls around her, embracing her in its hold. "This is where I feel strong," she finishes.

"Do you want to use this?" Kai holds up the blue package Liam gave them.

The moonlight hits it, emphasizing how small it is. Serena wonders how it can make such a huge difference in their lives. *To have a calfling or not?* "What do you think?" she asks.

"I think…" Kai lets his hand drop to his side. "We have all the time in the world, Serena, now that we've made a promise to be together. Can we enjoy each other now and look forward to a family later?"

Turning toward the full moon, Serena allows its silvery light to hit her face. She feels its pull, just as the waves do. The ebb and flow of Serena's

internal tides are stimulated when the lunar orb shines at its brightest. It is why the maidens must be on shore to complete The Pairing.

Will I dishonor the ancients by using the gift from Liam? Serena asks herself. But Kai already put it perfectly – *let us enjoy each other now and look forward to a family later.*

Serena turns back to Kai and gives him a shy nod. Then she takes the basket of wolfsbane flowers and tips them into the water as another wave makes the trek to earth. Yellow petals curve up to a crest then dance, spinning in circles in the frothy turmoil after the wave breaks. They follow the tide toward the sandy beach.

Kai gathers Serena into his arms. She rises onto her tiptoes, and their lips meet. Hand splayed out on his chest in between them, Serena can feel his heart thundering inside. She responds by wrapping her other arm around his neck and pulling him close, anchoring him as he does for her. By the time the last of the flowers wash ashore, Serena and Kai are tangled together, sinking into the vibrant waves.

Chapter Nineteen

Serena is floating in a kelp forest. The long strands of seaweed sway in the current, the canopy above letting in snatches of soft sunlight. Velvety tendrils wrap around her waist, seeping warmth into her body.

"Serena." Her name floats to her through thick plants.

"Hmm?" she says.

"Serena!" It comes across more urgently.

Serena stirs, and the slow realization that she is not floating dawns on her as her shoulder rubs into hard rock. She opens bleary eyes. It is not kelp wrapped around her waist, but a single arm.

She blinks her eyes all the way open. Murphy stands at the entrance to the queen's quarters.

He clears his throat and bows. "Your majesty, Assembly awaits."

"So let them wait," Kai's says, his voice still heavy with sleep and muffled by Serena's hair. His breath tickles the back of her neck. "*Her majesty* hasn't even had breakfast yet." He unlatches Serena's waist and stretches. "And neither have I," he mumbles under his breath.

"Unfortunately, there is no time. The couples from last night are present to report The Pairing a success," says Murphy, shifting from one foot to another.

"I forgot about that part," says Serena. After she and Kai left the beach, they came straight to Serena's quarters. With the changes in ceremony to accommodate for a more all-around private affair, she'd just assumed there was no need to report details of each pairing.

"Council is delaying Assembly by giving reports on progress of preparations for The Migration," says Murphy. "You have a few minutes to make ready." Murphy turns on his heel and leaves, his footsteps fading into Evandre's voice in the background describing the ecosystem and geography of the new destination to the rest of Society.

Kai yawns as he rolls to his back. He puts his hands behind his head, then freezes as he stares up at Poseidon for the first time. "Well, this is awkward," he says.

"Tell me about it." Serena scoots closer to Kai.

"You sleep under Poseidon every night, while he stares at you with those twinkling eyes and that chiseled jaw?"

Serena smiles. "Not to mention that bare chest and… what really lies underneath his tunic anyway?" She sits up halfway, squinting as if to inspect.

"Oh no you don't," says Kai. He covers Serena's eyes with his hand, then pushes himself on top of her.

"Kai, stop." She giggles.

"Look away, Poseidon." Kai shields Serena's body with his. "She isn't decent!"

Serena's lungs open up in a full-bodied laugh that ends in a snort. She clamps her hand over her mouth, and they both go still, glancing at the hallway. Evandre's voice is droning on about polar bears and caribou in the arctic.

"I don't think they heard," whispers Kai.

"I don't really care if they did," she whispers back.

He knits his eyebrows together, feigning confusion. "Then why are you whispering?"

"Shut up and kiss me," Serena says.

Their lips meet, and Serena inhales the briny scent of Kai. Lips breaking apart in a smile, Kai helps her off the sleeping rock. "Ready to face them?" he asks.

"With you by my side—always."

They pause together in the hallway, calling forth scales until they are formally garbed for appearance in the Great Hall. As they walk forward, and the crowd comes into view, maidens shout out questions about human interference at Ivvavik National Park.

"What about Ungainlies?"

"Ivvavik is true wilderness," answers Evandre. "It is ice-covered and rarely visited in winter. There are no facilities, trails, services, or campgrounds for Ungainlies in the park. The most likely time for Ungainly presence is the four months during summer."

"And who will keep the Ungainlies away then?" another insists.

"The werewolves will," answers Serena, stepping into the light of the Great Hall.

Startled, the maidens closest to her turn and start bobbing their heads or bending in a full curtsey. The end result looks like an uncoordinated wave.

Serena decides to ignore it. "Thank you, Evandre." Serena nods to the Head Scientist as she makes her way up to the mid-platform. "We'll establish more question and answer sessions over the next few days," she addresses Society before ascending the stairs to her throne. Kai has already taken his position in the line of the Queen's Guard.

Several of the maidens from The Pairing stand on the mid-platform. Serena looks them over. "I trust everything went well last night?" She sits in the oversized chair.

All of them nod, refusing to announce any details. Serena is grateful for that. Her eyes come to rest on her former caste mate.

"Simone?"

The red-scaled maiden snaps her head up at the Queen's inquiry.

"The wound at your arm?" Serena asks.

Simone looks at it before glancing at her partner. Her cheeks flush to almost the color of her scales. "We… accidently tipped over our basket of wolfsbane flowers."

Serena arches one eyebrow.

"Then we accidentally rolled in them," says Simone in further explanation.

A quick glance at her partner reveals he has the same superficial burns along his arms and legs. There are a few snickers from the crowd.

"The pair of you, please see Hailey directly after this," says Serena. She turns toward the Head Doctor. "Hailey, I trust you managed to pass the event unscathed?"

"Yes, your majesty." She steps out from the line of council members. "But it will be my last stock of charcoal to treat them."

"That's fine," says Serena. "I don't think wolfsbane grows in the arctic."

Sarafina and Evandre both acknowledge the assumption, but Serena isn't watching them. Instead, she catches the unsure glance Hailey sends straight across the mid-platform to Murphy. Even standing at attention, he seems to stiffen at her look.

Serena sighs. "Murphy Air-Spirit and Hailey Sage-Brush…" Serena trails off, wondering if Hailey will take his last name now that they are paired. A sharp pang of realization runs through her – will Serena take Kai's name? *Serena Forest.* It doesn't have quite the same ring as Serena Moon-Shadow.

"Your majesty?" Murphy says.

Serena realizes with a start he is already standing in front of her. She takes a deep breath. "Do you have anything to report?" *Please don't report anything – I don't want any details.*

"As a matter of fact, your majesty," Hailey says. "We do."

Murphy stiffens even more.

Oh, Poseidon go easy on me. Closing her eyes, Serena grips the armrest of the throne, steeling herself. "Proceed." When she opens her eyes, the pair is holding hands.

Looking Serena straight in the eye, the Head of the Guard lifts his chin. "We have decided to stay, your majesty."

By the time his words register with Serena, her ears are already ringing. She shakes her head, as if to clear it of extraneous noise and focuses her increasingly blurry eyes on Murphy, trying to decide if he is joking. But he is not known for his jokes. She turns to Kai, the only guard member notorious for pranks, and it is his wide eyes and dropping jaw that convinces Serena this is real.

The Undine have just lost the Head of the Guard and their Healer as they are about to embark on a treacherous journey.

Stunned into speechlessness, Serena snaps her mouth shut at the movement out of the corner of her eye. Nerin is leaving her position at Serena's side to descend the stairs. She stops on the mid-platform, standing next to Murphy and Hailey.

"And I respectfully request to abstain from The Migration, your majesty," says Nerin. "I will stay by my son's side and, by Poseidon's grace, see my first grand-calfling."

Mariam, Rayne, Ronan, Hailey, Murphy, and now Nerin. Serena's closest friends, family, confidants, and advisors—all choosing to stay, leaving Serena to fend for herself.

Slowly, she rises from her throne. "Is there any other Undine that wish to announce their intent to stay?" Her eyes bore into the crowd, almost daring someone to speak. She bangs the stem of her trident against the ground. The boom echoes throughout the cavern. "Speak now! This will be your last chance," Serena shouts, taking one step down and pointing Dagon at the three before her. "I could not bear any more. I will not leave anyone else behind."

Nerin shrinks away from the tips of Serena's trident, and Hailey edges behind Murphy. Serena's arm shakes, and she knows she is about to break

down. She turns and throws Dagon against the throne, chest heaving. "We leave at moonrise tomorrow," her broken voice croaks.

Keeping her eyes locked on the ground, Serena descends the steps toward her own chambers. "Inform the wolves," she hisses to Evandre as she passes the line of council members, every head turning to follow Serena as she leaves Assembly.

"No one is to disturb me until I emerge," she says to the guard standing at the entrance. "No one." Serena disappears into the hallway, intending to have a long talk with Poseidon.

Chapter Twenty

Under the next moonrise, Serena stands on the beach alone facing the darkened forest looming before her. Her hands at her sides, she does not waver as she waits.

Eyes catching a shifting shadow, Serena turns her attention slightly to her right.

Liam steps out, taking deliberate strides toward Serena.

"Where are your maidens?" Liam asks.

Serena turns her head, glancing over her shoulder at the ocean. "They are here, awaiting your wolves."

Sniffing the air, Liam scans the breaking waves. His eyes settle back on Serena. "I wasn't sure which form we should come in. Werewolves might scare you back into the water…" Liam trails off as small beams of light begin to appear in the ocean.

One by one, the bioluminescent hair of each Undine flickers to life, illuminating their faces. Angled cheekbones underscore colorful skin while sharp chins lift in confidence. Dark clouds roll over the silvery moon, and more maidens appear bathed in their own light. Some are already on the beach, startling Liam back. Arista stands behind Serena, flanked by guards and wrists in chains—yet her thin lips are curved in a smile. More Undine stand where waves crash against their bodies, and there are several still waiting further back, both above and below the surface.

"My maidens can hold their own, Liam of Clan Werich," Serena says, stepping closer and lowering her voice. "Let your wolves come in animal form, brother. It will even the playing field."

Adam's apple bobbing once in his throat, Liam nods. "It shouldn't be a problem for us to transform, since we are still close to a full moon, and energy runs high tonight. Give us a minute to distribute capes, then we'll proceed to the docks as a group."

The entire fleet from Doug's Pier has already been prepped for the journey and stocked with supplies for both sides. Five boats in all, including a fifty-foot wooden trawler, a sailboat, an ocean tug, a center console fishing boat, and the smallest of them a twenty-eight-foot cabin

cruiser. The rest of Doug's fleet was deemed unsuitable for the long journey and will be left with Danny to manage.

As Liam disappears back into the trees, Serena turns to the sounds of webbed feet in ankle-deep water. A small group of Undine walks onto the beach, led by Murphy and Nerin. There are fifteen in all—it is everyone that chose to stay.

Serena meets them at the high-tide line, where the ocean leaves its mark up and down the coast. Dotting the sand are scraps of kelp, broken shells, and other bits of debris from the home Serena will never see again.

She bends to pick up a whole shell that has washed ashore and runs the pad of her thumb over reddish-purple ridges. It is a thin specimen, showing small fissures along its length. Serena can't help but think of the same happening to the scales of the Undine she leaves behind. She closes her hand around the shell and looks at Murphy. "Rayne and Ronan, my adoptive mother and father, are staying. My best friend, Mariam, has elected to stay. Nerin, my most relied upon mentor, will also stay behind." Serena swallows hard as her eyes run over the group. "And so does my trusted Head of the Guard." Her voice cracks.

Murphy steps forward, hand going to his chest. He looks as though he himself is about to crack.

Serena puts up a hand, stopping him. "Murphy… I put them in your hands to protect. And I know you will do it."

He smiles, bowing deep. "As you say, your majesty."

"Murphy." Serena frowns.

"I know, I know." He straightens, then steps forward to scoop Serena in a tight hug. It stitches her back together. "I will take care of them, Serena."

When Murphy sets her back down, Serena still rolls the shell in her hand and turns to Nerin. "I am confident that separation will not hurt anyone this time. There is a theory that the Undine may break apart from one another without pain if there are two alphas. One to lead each group. Nerin—you have advised my father and me through many trying obstacles. It is time to take the reins yourself."

In an unprecedented break in decorum, Nerin's eyes go wide. "That is a very great honor, your majesty."

Serena raises an eyebrow.

Nerin clears her throat and curtsies. "One I shall carry out with respect, duty, and morality. Thank you, your majesty."

"I bestow the title of Queen and leader of the Undine… Vancouver Chapter" —Serena smiles— "to Nerin. All hail the Queen."

"All hail the Queen," echoes the group behind Nerin. But there are so few, their voices are lost in the next wave.

"Make the ancients proud," says Serena.

"Thank you, your majesty," Nerin answers. "I'd tell you to do the same, but you already have."

Serena glances out at the whale rock. "Is this how my father would do it?" she asks Nerin, voice almost at a whisper.

Nerin doesn't hesitate to answer. "I don't think it matters. I never liked the way your father did it, either." Nerin curtsies to Serena for the first and the last time, then steps back.

Hailey comes forward, her hands filled with vials. "The last remnants of the transformation potion, should you need it," she says.

Serena places them gently in the dry bag latched around her waist.

"I've trained my three apprentices well. They will be able to address any medical needs as I would myself. They have already packed the bulk of my herbs and medicines. And I've given Darcy my notes on the biology of Undine. She is a good nurse and can help with emergencies. But don't —"

"Hailey," Serena interrupts. "You are babbling."

Hailey's lips press together, then burst out as she sobs. "I'm stalling." She hugs Serena almost as tightly as Murphy did. "Just… be careful. And stay away from the wolfsbane."

"I will," Serena promises. "We'll be fine. You be careful, too."

Serena turns to Mariam, who has inched her way to the front along the outskirts of the group. "I have a gift for you, too," Mariam says before Serena can speak. She holds out a package. "The Ancestral Book. It should go with the youth of our Society, so they don't forget. Besides, I don't think you've ever had a chance to read it."

"Thank you, Mariam," says Serena.

"I've wrapped it carefully. It should be protected even if your dry bag leaks."

This time, Serena doesn't wait for the hug. She steps in and takes one herself. Mariam smells like the archives—solid, strong earth and musty books. "I will never forget you," Serena whispers into the woman’s shoulders.

"Nor I you," says Mariam. "Be good to yourself."

"Be good to those books." Serena sniffs as she detaches herself from Mariam.

Mariam smiles. "Always am."

As Mariam retreats to the back of the small group, more maidens with glowing hair come ashore, preparing for The Migration. Serena does a quick count in her head. They are all almost here.

Next, Serena turns to Ronan and Rayne. Serena's adoptive mother is smiling so big little wrinkles appear around her eyes. But the corners of her mouth quiver. "Here," she says, thrusting a jar in Serena's arms. "Hijki—your favorite."

"Thank you." Serena puts the jar in her dry bag, along with the shell she keeps turning over in her hand. Not even that can distract her anymore—she is about to say goodbye to the Undine that raised her. No words come to Serena, and her arms feel as heavy as the whale rock watching quietly from a distance.

Serena glances at the monument standing alone in the sea, where her father once ruled… and died. She thinks of all the decisions that led to her standing here in a defining moment as she is about to split Society, most of them never to return to their ancient lands. She looks at Ronan and Rayne. "I'm so… sorry," she croaks out.

Rayne's eyes snap up to Serena, the lines disappearing from her face. "Don't be, Serena. Do you hear me? We are so very proud of you." She continues to pin Serena with an unwavering gaze.

"I hear you, Mother Rayne," Serena says, the lump in her throat disintegrating. It is replaced with a bit of confidence.

Serena steps in and two pairs of loving arms wrap her in an embrace. The moon comes out from behind the clouds, warming the trio. When they finally release each other, Serena's eyes fall to Ronan. He cups her chin in his rough, leathery hand. "You'll be just fine, Painted Maiden—just fine." It is the first time Ronan hasn't used the term 'little calfling' with that phrase.

Ronan stares directly over Serena's shoulder. "Take care of our daughter."

Serena turns to find Kai, fully scaled and gripping his trident.

"I will her protect her with my own life," Kai says.

Ronan grunts in return.

Serena finally releases her mother's hand and watches in silence as the group bids their farewells to others, then retreat into the water. As the last of the group, Mariam pauses when her shoulders are just above the surface. She turns to give Serena one final wave. And when her chocolate scales disappear into the water, Serena exhales, her body shuddering as it releases the stress hovering over her the last few weeks. She takes in a new breath. Wind blows in from the northwest, fresh and crispy cold. A hint of what is to come.

"All is well?" Kai asks.

"Yes," says Serena. She scans the water, waiting for signs of anyone changing their mind in the last minute and reappearing. No one comes. Serena latches her dry bag closed and folds extra flaps over the opening.

"You almost forgot this." Kai hands Dagon to Serena.

She takes it, turning the stem so the three prongs on top gleam in the moonlight. "I was considering leaving it behind." Serena shudders as she remembers throwing it against the throne in a fit of rage right in front of all of Society. "Apologies for my actions."

"Forgiven before they even occurred." Kai winks at her. He looks out at the maidens on the beach. "And what of your father's old trident?"

"Resting," says Serena, her voice soft. "In his chamber beneath the gaze of Poseidon. Along with mother's jewel from my breastplate." She smiles back. "They can all keep each other company."

"You aren't bringing your armor?"

She lifts her chin, soaking in confidence from the moon. "We aren't traveling to fight. We are traveling to live."

He narrows his eyes. "What did you do last night?"

Running her webbed toes in the sand at their feet, Serena traces the shape of a crescent moon. "I had a long talk with Poseidon."

Kai grunts, reminding Serena of Ronan. "What did he say?"

She brushes the pad of her foot across the sand, smearing the moon away. "He said to let go of the past." She pauses, taking Kai's hand. "To look to the future and believe in myself."

The pair turns toward the moon, high and bright in the sky—ready to lead the way. It is full besides a sliver, waning into the new moon.

Kai squeezes Serena's hand. "I could've told you that."

"I know." She squeezes back, and her smile grows wider.

The wind dies down, and with it the soft noise of webbed feet shuffling ashore goes silent. Serena turns to find all of the maidens in line down the beach. She starts to count but stops when she realizes Kai's lips are already murmuring numbers.

"They are all here," he says a moment later.

The last of the saltwater slides down scales in a shimmery cascade, then sinks into the sand below them. Serena steps forward and turns so all of the Undine can see her. "Calm yourselves, maidens," she says, trusting the still of the night to carry her voice. The rest of the maidens need to get their glow under control.

Council members, spread throughout the line of Society, take the hint first. The bioluminescence of Evandre and Sarafina flickers away and the maidens surrounding them follow suit. When the last of them go dark, Serena turns back to the forest, watching the shadows.

It isn't long before Liam reemerges, this time as his wolf. Yellowed talons sink into the sand underneath matted fur…and Serena can't be sure, but he looks much larger than she remembers. The rest of his clan isn't far behind. Dark shapes slink out from in between trees, and when the shadows release their hold, the hulking forms of more wolves take shape. Up and down the tree line, the wolves stand across from the Painted Maidens, their numbers almost equivalent, one clawed set of feet for every pair of webbed feet.

When all the wolves are present, there is nothing left to do but to stare at each other. Liam and Serena exchange nervous glances. The last time all of the species were present, they were killing each other. Bonds of trust have been reestablished at the upper levels, but not down in the ranks.

Adrenaline, almost as thick as the smell of salt itself, spikes down the line. Serena can see hairs bristle on the back of wolves' necks, and in response her own maidens call forth more scales.

Liam turns his head, growling. The warning is directed at his own. The energy of the area is escalating, and one wrong move could set the The Migration off in disaster.

Quick feet bouncing across the sand draw all eyes to one end of the line. Darcy is marching straight through the beach in the middle of werewolves and Undine, her kids in tow and Cordelia's infant son in her arms. The only human among a sea of creatures almost ready to square off against each other has shocked the atmosphere into submission. The

tension decreases as Undine stare at the tiny, mewling baby in Darcy's arms who has recently undergone the transformation potion out of pure necessity for survival. It is a good reminder why The Migration is so important and why the wolves and the Undine must work together.

Darcy's two youngest boys skip behind her, delighting in the unabashed attention and mesmerized by the Undine. When they bound too close to the line of werewolves, they get a playful nudge back toward their mother. Their mere presence calms the wolves.

But it isn't the youngest boys or Darcy or even Cordelia's baby that stills Serena's heart. It is the oldest boy, Aiden. Coming out from behind his younger siblings, Aiden is in werewolf form. He lengthens his stride and puffs out his chest. Embracing the beast that is a part of him, Aiden is not fearful or ashamed of his transformation.

Serena turns as she watches Aiden lope by. The werewolf bows his head slightly to Serena as he passes, then to Liam across from her—and they each return the favor.

Once Darcy and the kids have crossed the beach, Serena, Kai, and Liam turn to face north, and everyone else follows suit.

"Ready to go?" Serena asks Kai.

"With you by my side," he says. "Always."

The werewolves and Undine take the first steps of their journey.

Chapter Twenty-One

One long column of Undine and one long column of werewolves, side by side, take little more than an hour to hike to Doug's Pier. Beforehand, strict instructions were given to Undine that they must stay out of the water. The entire journey is to be taken alongside the wolves and Serena and Liam agreed the first few steps would be important in setting the tone.

Nonetheless, Serena keeps catching her Undine glancing out at the ocean, especially when the wind catches the top crest of a wave, spritzing the maidens with crisp saltwater. Needing a distraction from her maidens and the teasing ocean herself, Serena concentrates on the werewolves. They are an impressive sight with stalking strides, shifting the weight of their muscle-wrapped frames from shoulder to shoulder. Trying to look past their yellowed talons slicing into soft sand and red eyes that constantly scan their surroundings, Serena focuses in on the slight twitches of their ears and tails. Every time they glance at Undine, ears perk forward and hackles stand tall. But when laughter from one of Darcy's boys floats down the pack, their tails give a friendly swish. Occasionally, with barely perceptible whimpers, the wolves look into the tree line, pining to enter their protected domain of the forest.

The rolling columns enter hills and traverse one tall cliff at the edge of the sea. Finally, Doug's Pier comes into view. Their transports, a fleet of five boats and ships of varying sizes stand ready at the docks. Serena, Liam, and Kai pick up their pace so they move to the front of the lines. Standing with Doug, all in Ungainly form, are the pack members who have chosen to stay. And like the Undine who will remain behind, they are all older members of the clan. They busy themselves passing out clothes and collecting capes from those who transform back into their Ungainly forms.

Liam briefly disappears to change. Once he returns, he directs the incoming columns onto boats. Every vessel will hold equal amounts of each species. Continuing to force them to mix until they are comfortable with each other is the only option.

"You are all set up in Cecil's cabin?" Liam asks Danny.

"Me and five others," says Danny. "It'll feel cramped for a few days until we can have some trailers pulled over to the property. But we've got

new scenery—so it sort of feels like Christmas. Oh," Danny looks at Serena. "Speakin' of Christmas, I have some presents for you."

She can't help but put a hand to her already bulging dry bag. But the device he hands her is small.

"I've seen these before," Serena says, turning it over and pushing at the buttons on the front.

"It's a phone—a satellite phone," explains Danny. "I'll keep one with me in Cecil's cabin, and I'll let them mermaids that are stayin' come to use it anytime they want."

She turns it over in her hand, then lifts a questioning eyebrow at him.

"You can talk through it," Liam explains. "You won't see them, but you can hear them."

Danny nods. "This ain't the dark ages. We can and will stay connected."

Serena's eyes light up. "I may confer with the remaining Undine?"

"Sure. Just don't get it wet," says Danny. "And try not to crush it."

"Thank you," says Serena, trying to keep tears from her eyes. "Truly the best gift you could have given me.

"I've got somethin' else," Danny mumbles.

Serena places the phone in her dry bag at her hip. When Danny extends his hand and opens his palm, a silver-chained necklace with a small charm rests on it. Leaning in for a closer look, Serena and Liam both emit an awed sigh. The charm is a tiny mermaid, her tail curved up so the entire shape makes a small 'U'. Her upper body is bare but only her back shows. Serena runs the pad of her thumb down the long locks of hair cascading down the mermaid's shoulders almost to her scales at her waistline.

"You made this?" whispers Serena.

"Out of them poles you let me have." Danny nods. "Except the hair. That comes from a special stone."

"What is special about it?" asks Liam.

"It has luminescence."

"Like our hair?" asks Serena.

"Of sorts," says Danny. "But this one lights up only when another type of stone is close. The energy of the both of them together creates the light. Look…" Danny motions down the dock and another man with two large boxes comes forward. As he walks closer, the hair of the mermaid in Serena's hand begins to glow. At first, only subtle glimmers are

perceptible, but by the time the man with the boxes is next to them the charm is at full radiance.

Danny reaches into one of the boxes pulling out several more mermaid charms. "These are for your maidens. They won't glow—that quality is unique to yours, meant to help you find a maiden if she gets lost along the way."

"Danny," says Serena. "Thank you. I don't… I mean…"

"The least I could do," says Danny. "You are the best thing that has ever happened to the clan, well, since Liam here anyway."

"Hey!" Liam protests.

"I've got somethin' for Mr. Second Best too," Danny reaches into the next box.

Liam crosses his arms. "I ain't wearin' no necklaces."

"What about a bracelet?" Danny smiles. He pulls out several silver bracelets. The twisted band ends with a wolf head on either side. "Don't worry, yours is just as special." Danny pulls out an envelope, emptying the contents—one of the wolf bracelets—into Liam's palm. "In yours, the eyes light up when one of your wolves is close."

Turning his arm, moonlight flashes along the ridges of the bracelet until Liam's wrist is pointed toward the heavens, and the eyes of each wolf glow red.

"Brilliant," Serena says the same time as Liam says, "awesome."

"I've got three smaller ones for them wolf cubs, and they're all flexible so they won't just break off during transformation."

"Thank you, Danny." Liam looks at the older werewolf with a steady gaze. Eyes flitting past Danny's shoulder, Liam motions to the rest of the pack members who have chosen to stay. They line up behind Danny. "You got this?" asks Liam.

"I do," says Danny.

Serena realizes that short exchange is their way of designating the alpha of Clan Werich.

With Poseidon's luck, the magic that binds us together will realize that, too.

"Liam." Danny motions to the side.

The two men bow their heads together deliberating, but Serena can hear their words anyway.

"Just so you know, those phones won't turn on until you put the batteries in." Danny slips Liam a separate package. "I don't recommend you do it until you are plenty past the breakin' point, if you get my drift."

Serena looks toward her kingdom, understanding that Danny doesn't want to give the migrating group any reason to come back. If those left behind feel the pain of separation for some reason, Liam and Serena aren't to know about it.

She tries telling herself she wouldn't have known anyway but now the temptation will there, within reach.

"Serena?" Liam asks. "Ready to board?"

"Yes," Serena says. "After one last thing." She walks to the end of the pier where a thin but long trunk sits, its lid pushed open. It is the perfect size for tridents. She stops, staring into the dark shadows of the box, refusing to look at Dagon.

I am hiding away my status symbol; the one thing that sets me apart from the rest of the maidens, besides my blood.

Serena almost reels at her own admission. *There is more that sets me apart from them than my trident. Maybe I've relied on it too much.* She runs her palm up and down the two interlacing poles that create its stem.

But the trident is more than a status symbol. Murphy, Kai, and Serena's deceased friend, Ervin, had all sacrificed their own beloved tridents in order to make hers. Dagon has gotten Serena through some sticky situations, in the forests and in her own Assembly hall.

I think it's time to walk on my own now. Sorry, Dagon. We will meet again at Ivvavik.

She lay the trident down in the chest and turns away quickly. All of the Undine guards have come up behind her with their own tridents. She nods once, then pushes her way through them, unable to look back at the chest. Behind her she can hear the soft clink, clink as each of the guards submit their own tridents to the box.

The box will be sealed under lock and key for the duration of The Migration. If the Undine are spotted by Ungainlies, the least they look like mermaids, the better.

Serena looks to the fleet. Almost everyone is already seated. Rather, the Undine are seated with stiff backs, knees together, and hands in their lap. On each craft, they line one side of the boat. Across from them, the werewolf groups are chaotic, at best. They jostle for seats, settling

differences with wrestling matches that tilt even the largest of the ships as if it were in the midst of a storm.

When one wolf gets launched into the knees of Sophia Sunbeam, she draws them up into her chest. Serena shoots an accusatory glance at Liam.

"They're nervous." He shrugs.

The rest of the maidens surrounding Sophia stand, fully scaling themselves. Serena and Liam rush forward together, boarding the fifty-foot wooden trawler. Putting two fingers to his mouth, Liam whistles loud and shrill. The wolves stop wrestling and turn toward Liam, ears perked. He stares them down until the ship's rocking settles. Slowly, those in human form ease back on the benches and those in wolf form stretch out on the floor.

Serena walks to Sophia, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Take ease, maiden. It was not done on purpose."

Slowly reestablishing a poised position on the bench, Sophia gives Serena a tight smile. "I apologize, your majesty. It's just—"

Sophia cuts off as one of the beasts rolls over on his side, letting out a loud yawn. Serena shoots him a hard glare then squeezes Sophia's shoulder in reassurance.

"I've never been this close to them before," Sophia finishes.

"You sure about that, sunshine?" The gruff voice blares out from across Sophia. A pack member leans forward, elbows on his knees, looking at the maidens. Serena remembers Zeke from the truck ride to the motel. On all accounts, he was friendly enough toward Serena.

"What do you mean?" asks Sophia, drawing courage from her own kind surrounding her. Her own mother sits next to her, leaning close.

"You must be… what? Twenty-three?" Zeke asks.

"Twenty-four next full moon.” She narrows her eyes. “How do you know that?"

"I was there patrollin' the moon of your birth. I will never forget them orange scales."

Serena takes a small intake of breath that results in a squeak. That would have been before the Maiden's Massacre, when the wolves served as protectors.

Exchanging a nervous glance at her mother, Sophia presses her lips together before turning back to Zeke. "And my little sister, Sasha?" she

asks. "Did you witness her birth? Her scales were orange like mine, though some say they were even brighter."

"I did," he says quietly. "And they were." Zeke stares at the floor in front of him—he knows what is coming next.

Sophia squeezes her mother's hand. "Did you witness her death?"

All Undine heads turn toward Zeke, who by now looks like he wishes he never said anything. He looks up, glancing over his shoulder at the dock. One man is untying a rope that moors the sailboat to the pier, looping the line in a coil around his arm.

Sophia follows his gaze, watching as the man throws the rope into the ship and jumps in, giving one of the maidens an unnecessary nudge with his shoulder. Serena remembers watching the wolf tear into Sasha's soft middle—there is no way the maidens could distinguish who that was… but the wolves can.

"His name is Xavier," says Zeke.

Giving the slightest nod, Sophia acknowledges the exchange of information.

"Liam…" Serena mumbles in warning.

"I know," he says. "We should've just let them keep wrestlin'."

Jittering with nervous energy, one of the pack members paces the length of the boat then stops to peer into the lifejacket bin. He pulls out canned soup—one in each hand. "Where are all the lifejackets?" he asks.

Liam smiles and crosses his arms. "They are sittin' across from you."

The pack member looks at Sophia and her mother, sitting side by side on the bench with rigid spines. "Well ain't that some karma," he mumbles. He tosses the cans of soup back in the bin and slumps down onto the deck, swallowing hard as the boat's engine rumbles to life.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Liam, Serena, and Kai decide to part ways, each choosing a boat. They can only cover three of the five, but hopefully at least those three will be peaceful. Leaving Kai with Sophia and her mother on the trawler, Serena crosses the pier to board the sailboat with Xavier. Liam gives her a grateful nod. An attack against a wolf—retribution style—would be an unfortunate start to their journey.

"All ahead full!" A wolf calls beside Serena, making her jump. Sails unfurl, and Serena presses herself against the ship's railing to keep clear of the bustle. A crew of at least five scurries around the deck until the sailboat pulls away from the pier.

The same call echoes out from each of the other ships as they are forced away from their moorings. Colin, Darcy, and their boys are on the sturdy tugboat which takes the lead. The other four ships pair side by side in an inverted 'V' formation, like migrating geese. The boats that hold Liam and Serena end up together, in the middle of the fleet. As the ships pick up speed, Serena glances at her twin. Liam stands near the bow of the smaller fishing boat, the longer strands of his hair wave in a wild whirlwind around his face. Smoothing back her own, tame braid, Serena can't help but feel a bit of pride in her unruly brother. Liam scratches at his face before his hand falls to the small, cylindrical lumps in his pocket—the satellite phone's batteries.

Those batteries are the key to making the phone work—the only lifeline Serena now has to her orphan parents, Mariam, and the rest—she turns to look in the direction of Society. Dark grey clouds behind Serena part, allowing a swath of moonlight through. A pale band of silver marks a clear path over choppy waves into calmer waters. It is the way back home.

"You are facing the wrong direction, your majesty."

The clear voice turns Serena's palms cold. She presses them to her outer thighs as she turns toward Arista. The maiden sits cross-legged on the wooden-planked floor, her hands chained to the side railing of the boat.

"There, that is much better," says Arista.

The moon illuminates a path in this direction, too. But the waves are so high the light only touches the frothy white crests. Every trough in

between falls into exaggerated darkness.

"It means you have a tumultuous journey ahead of you," says Arista, following Serena's gaze over the agitated waters. "I've foreseen as much, anyway."

"Foreseen?" asks Serena. She doesn't want to get dragged into a conversation with Arista, especially now that those around them turn their heads in interest. But Serena needs something to distract her from her jittery nerves. "What do you mean?"

"Apologies, your majesty. I forget you may be too young to recall."

Serena grits her teeth. Every time someone mentions her age, she detects doubt of her leadership capabilities. "Recall what?"

"Before I was tried and sentenced, I served as assistant to the Undine Psychic." Arista moves her cuffed wrists to face Serena, the chains rattling as she readjusts.

"You…?" Serena trails off. "No, I don't recall. I didn't have much occasion to visit Isadora."

Arista throws her head back and laughs. The high pitch cackle causes several wolves on the boat to shudder. "You think it might have been helpful, given all that has happened?" Arista says in between more giggling.

"Perhaps," Serena says, pressing her palms even harder into her sides just to keep them from going for Arista's throat. "And yourself? Did you foresee prison and chains in your future?"

Laughter dying on her lips, Arista looks at the ground, sullen. Clouds slowly move to cover the moon once again, and the lighted path over the ocean disappears.

"The first thing Isadora…" Arista's voice cracks as she mentions her former mentor. She swallows and tries again. "The first thing Isadora taught me was never to look too closely at my own future." Raising her chin, Arista looks at Serena with a hardened stare. "Sometimes it is better not to know when death is coming."

Serena's body goes rigid. She can't decide if Arista is threatening her, or just speaking the truth. Choosing to let it pass, for now, Serena nods. "As you say."

Arista blinks once, then leans back. "If you ever want a reading, your majesty, just let me know." She holds up her chains. "I'll be here."

"Noted," mumbles Serena. She scans the line of maidens and wolves, this time for a distraction from conversation with Arista. Entrenched in the middle of the ship is the cockpit. One pack member has his hands on the oversized wheel, shouting out orders to the crew. Doug sits beside him, a map sprawled open on his lap. He wears his work shirt with 'Doug's Rentals' scrawled across the back and a red handkerchief hanging out of his front pocket.

Leaving Arista to toy with her chains, Serena descends two steps into the small cockpit area.

"Doug." She bobs her head at the navigator.

"Hey, there's my favorite singer." Doug smiles at Serena before shouldering the man with his hands on the wheel. "This one can belt a tune.”.

The man only grunts in response, not bothering to glance at Serena.

"Seth ain't so appreciative of music," says Doug turning away from his map. "Maybe because he hasn't heard you. Go on and let him hear it, Serena."

"Apologies," says Serena. "But I don't wish to cause a disaster on the first day of our travels."

Seth bursts into laughter, finally looking at Serena with an appreciative twinkle in his eye.

Trying not to take the outburst as a slight, Serena glances at the map. "Planning our route?"

"The route is planned," says Doug. "I'm just checkin' and double checkin'. Wanna look?"

"Please." Serena bends over slightly to see.

"We travel through the night," says Doug, "then stop for a short break."

"What then?"

"Then…" Doug sits up straight in his small, swiveling chair as if ready to make a big announcement. "We join up with a race."

"A race?" asks Serena, her eyes snapping to both of the men with renewed interest.

"A race," both Doug and Seth confirm with wide smiles on their faces.

"Well, more like a derby," says Seth. "It is the Capital to Capital Yacht Derby. Goes from Olympia, Washington to Juneau, Alaska."

"It will be one week of navigatin' a labyrinth of channels, sounds, whirlpools, bays, fjords, rivers, and the open Pacific Ocean through one of

the vilest stretches of water in the world." Doug leans forward, almost standing.

"And this is a good thing?" asks Serena, her stomach doing flip-flops.

"It's perfect!" says Doug. "We enter the race and join the other boaters. Any other time our fleet would have to face customs at some point. Besides, during the race fuel and supply stations are set up along the way just for the boaters."

"What about the sheer number of bodies we have on these boats?" asks Serena. "Won't it look odd for a race? Won't the other racers surely notice?"

"Yeah, well…" Doug runs the back of his hand across his nose. "We'll have to stash all the wolves and as many mermaids as we can below deck in the tug boat and the trawler."

Serena looks across the water at Liam, still standing at the bow of the fishing boat. They lock eyes for a brief moment, then he looks down, busying himself with unraveling then coiling a length of rope. He knows what information is being relayed to her.

Serena narrows her eyes at her brother, then turns her attention back to Doug. "And what about the rest of the Undine? What about those we cannot *stash* below deck?"

Swinging around in his chair to look at the row of Undine sitting on benches, Doug rubs his chin. Finally, he looks up at Serena. "They can swim, can't they?"

"Doug!" Serena looks down her nose at him. "Not *that* far—why do you think we are all on the boats now?"

"Honestly, I thought it was because this would be a fun experience for them. Sort of like a carnival ride. I mean—how often do they get to ride on boats?"

Serena buries her forehead in the palm of her hand.

"Tumultuous journey…" taunts Arista from just outside the cockpit.

"Doug?" Serena asks, staring at the rough waves ahead. "May I borrow that handkerchief?"

He glances down at the red plaid material sticking out of his shirt pocket. "Sure—why?"

"I am going to gag the psychic."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The remainder of the night is uneventful. The ocean calms as day begins to dawn. Most of the passengers of the fleet doze off just as the stars in the sky fade under the brightening sun. Serena herself has found a cozy spot next to the ship's railing. Lulled to sleep by gentle rocking, Serena's eyes flutter closed. It feels like no more than five minutes when the ship stops suddenly and she is forced awake with a rude jolt.

"Land ho!" Doug laughs, jumping out of the cockpit and nudging wolves aside as he and the crew pick up coils of rope to tie off to the dock.

Reluctantly, Serena forces life back in each of her limbs, stretching and yawning. The land beyond the pier is more of the same thin strip of beach followed by looming forest. "Where are we?" asks Serena.

"Hope Island." Doug begins nudging some of the slower-to-rouse wolves. "Wake up! Gonna camp on land today."

Serena frowns. "Hope Island? That is no more than a stone's throw from Vancouver Island." Twisting to stare past the stern, Serena squints. "In fact… isn't that our island right there?"

"Quite the navigator—want the job?" Doug tosses his rolled map to Serena, leaving both hands free to wrangle the rope.

"Hardly," mumbles Serena. But she unfurls the map anyway as maidens edge around her to disembark the boat.

"See here." Doug points to the map – it has been enlarged and shows their path. "We wait until late afternoon when the racers will be sailing right past this point. We'll trickle in between them; it is toward the end of the day, so they should be spread pretty far apart. With luck, no one will even notice."

"So this is the race route?" Serena traces a purple line up the northern coast of Canada.

"Yep," says Doug.

She follows the line from Olympia harbor through Puget Sound and into the Strait of Georgia. The Undine left behind could even witness the racers passage, if they poked their heads above water at just the right time. It will be as the racers enter Queen Charlotte Sound that The Migration will sneak around from the back of Hope Island, where they are now, to

merge with the race. The rest of the way is wrought with twists and turns through tight passages, straights and sometimes even rivers. It reminds Serena of the narrow tunnel leading to the archives, and she feels a pain of loss for her home, and for Mariam.

Blinking back tears before they can take hold, Serena focuses back on the purple line outlining her fate. "The race stops here" Serena holds out the map for Doug, pointing at the final leg through Clarence Strait near the finishing point at Juneau. "Yet we still have to skirt the entirety of Alaska before we get to the northern coasts and Ivvavik. Five thousand miles, at least."

"Seven thousand, give or take," says Doug.

Serena looks at him with wide eyes. "The race is just the beginning."

He nods. "We'll have to make a choice in Juneau. Easy way or hard way."

"What do you mean?"

"To go over land" —he traces a potential path with his finger— "would be under three thousand miles. Cut the trip by more than half."

"Yes, but my maidens may not be able to be away from the water that long. Besides, Darcy said Ivvavik isn't accessible by roads. How would we get there if not from around the coast?"

"We are just figurin' out as we go along, sweetheart."

Serena gives Doug a hard look. She isn't sure if it is for the nickname or the unacceptable lack of planning, on both their parts. She blinks, then turns her attention back to the map, folding it in frustration.

"Gentle, gentle!" says Doug. "I take it back, you'd make a terrible navigator. You've got to *roll* the maps."

As Serena relinquishes the map to Doug, she spots a small commotion just off the pier on the sandy dunes of the small island. One of the pack members is bent over, heaving. Several friends come to his aid, but there is nothing they can do to help. Serena leaves the boat, walks down the aging pier, and crosses the sandy beach.

"Sea sickness." Liam stops her. "Best just to let him ride it out."

"As you say," says Serena. She turns away, trying to block out the gagging noises. "So glad we don’t have to worry about that with the Undine—"

Serena is nudged out of the way by a maiden running for the water. An incoming wave reaches the maiden's feet just as she expels the contents of

her stomach.

Liam bites on the back of a knuckle to keep from laughing.

"Not funny, Liam!" Serena elbows him in the side before she follows the maiden into the ocean.

"Kiera," Serena says, recognizing the Undine gardener. "Just try to breath."

Kiera looks at Serena. Recognition dawns on her face and she straightens. "Your majesty!" Attempting to curtsey, Kiera pauses just as she bends, grasping her stomach again. "Oh, no." She looks up at Serena, mortified.

They both know what is going to happen next.

"I'll just go get a healer," says Serena, backing away.

Kiera nods, looking a little green in the face, though her natural color is a light pinkish-purple. Her cheeks puff out, and Serena turns away from the maiden at the sound of thick chunks hitting the water.

"We have a long way to go," Liam tells Serena once she is back on the beach. "This could turn serious if they keep it up."

"I know." Serena turns around to look for Hailey's medical assistants. "We can't have them wasting all our food." Spotting Simone's bright red scales, Serena waves her down.

Simone makes her way over to Serena, taking longer than necessary.

"Your majesty?"

"I'm hoping you have something for seasickness." Serena gestures to Kiera, still bent over in the waves. Serena's eyes widen slightly when she peers closer at Simone. "Are you okay, Simone? You look a little pale."

"Fine, fine," says Simone. But her nod is sluggish and her hands uncoordinated as she fumbles with the knotted dry bag at her waist. "Hailey insisted I take the rest of her ginger stock…" Simone mumbles to herself as she stumbles toward the sick maiden. The first wave nearly knocks her over.

"Your healer doesn't look so good herself," Liam tells Serena.

By now, Simone is rubbing Kiera's back and giving her instructions.

"I don't know," says Serena. "Hailey has taught her well. She at least knows what to do."

As if on cue, Simone herself turns away from her patient to vomit in the waves.

Serena sighs, shoulders sagging. "I'd better go find the other healers."

In her search for the other two healers—who, by the grace of Poseidon, are in good health—Serena finds five more maidens with seasickness. She herds the entire group, plus Kiera and Simone, to a discreet spot shielded by thick trees and shrubbery, lest the smell and noise inspire more sickness.

"There are a few members of the wolf clan who have seasickness, too," Serena tells one of the healers.

The maiden goes still, glancing at her dwindling supply of ginger. The vials have been collected and stacked in neat rows on a fold-out table. They sit beside a mortar and pestle for grinding.

Serena frowns at the hesitating maiden.

When the healer notices, she looks down at her feet. "I apologize, your majesty. But as you know, Undine are extremely sensitive to herbs grown in The Dry. And we aren't aware if there are any other remedies for upset stomachs that we can take. Surely the wolves have their own remedies – or at least are better suited to trying others."

"Perhaps," says Serena, tapping her fingers against her hip, glancing from the maiden to the ginger and back again. "Okay," she says. "We will leave the ginger to the maidens for now. But if the ailment gets any worse, we will have to share. And remember – you are healer to Undine and werewolf alike now. Understood?"

"Of course, your majesty," the maiden mumbles, avoiding Serena's eyes altogether.

Sighing, Serena leaves the healer to her patients, vowing to send any wolves should they look even worse for the wear. Returning to the main group, Serena finds Liam has organized the camp. There are cooking fires and a few tents set up to rest while shaded from the searing sun. The seasick wolves have been relegated to their own tent.

"You did well," Serena remarks to Liam's back. He squats over a fire, roasting a skewered salmon.

"Your maidens are good fisherman." He glances out to the waves where two pack members in Ungainly form stand. Past the breakers, there is a flicker of a scaled tail breaking the surface of the water, then a fish goes sailing through the air. One of the pack members reaches up to catch it. He can't get a grasp on the slippery, flopping fish, and after juggling it from hand to hand, the creature splashes back into the ocean and swims away. Liam smiles. "The fish are more easily caught when they are in wolf form,

but no one likes teeth marks in their food. Besides, it was freakin' out some of your maidens."

Serena smiles back. "We will have to work on that."

"Fish?" Liam holds the charred salmon in front of Serena's nose. Its eyes are wide with shock, the makeshift skewer protruding out from its open mouth.

"Ew, no." Serena grimaces, stepping back.

Liam shrugs, blows on the dead creature then tears a chunk out of the soft middle. With a full mouth, Liam gestures further up the beach. "Well if you ain't goin' to eat, you might as well get some rest. I set up a tent for you."

"I couldn't sleep now. We should keep an eye on everything. Besides." Serena glances at those spreading blankets in the open air or retreating under the shade of trees. "It seems unfair I should get a tent when there aren't enough to go around."

Liam puts an arm around Serena and walks, steering her toward the tents anyway. "I insist."

Serena leans as far away as she can from the smell of burnt fish on Liam's breath.

"I don’t want to see anythin' between the two of you anyway," Liam continues to talk in between bites.

"What do you mean?" Serena narrows her eyes but doesn't wait for an answer. "Liam, seriously. I have things to do."

She wiggles out of his grasp just as they reach the tent and bumps straight into Kai. "Apologies." Serena turns her attention to Kai. He is wet all over. "Have you been swimming?" Serena asks. The water that drips off him is all wrong. "You look… shiny."

Liam leans in close to Serena's ear, still chewing. "It’s sweat.”

"Ohhhh." Serena looks at Kai again. He smells saltier, if that is even possible. Sun glints off his chiseled midsection and chest as he swings an axe up to rest in the dip of his shoulder.

"I was chopping wood for the fires but took a break to set up the tent Liam provided for us." Kai runs the back of his hand across his forehead. "Just enough room in there for the two of us." Leaning over to unzip the opening, Kai gestures to a plate chiseled out of dried driftwood, holding a pile of food on top of it. There are sea vegetables only—no fish.

Beaming, Serena looks up at Kai. "Camping… suits you.”

Beside her, Liam snorts. "Hand over the axe, I'll finish choppin' wood."

Without his eyes every leaving Serena, Kai surrenders the axe.

"You just make sure she gets enough rest." Liam points the axe at Kai.

Scowling, Serena turns to her brother, nudging him away. Liam holds his hands up in innocence. "Alright, I'm goin', I'm goin'."

She watches him stride away, axe in one hand, the last of the poor fish on a stick in the other hand. Satisfied he will leave them in peace, Serena turns back to Kai. He is holding the tent flap open for Serena. "Hungry?" he asks.

Chapter Twenty-Four

After eating, Kai and Serena lie down together on smooth mats, listening to the camp settle down around them. She can hear Liam's voice in the distance assigning shifts for patrols as well as lookouts for the race. He recruits help in creating nets that can drag in the water alongside the boats to keep freshly caught fish preserved for consumption later. He checks in on sick members and makes sure everyone will get at least a few hours sleep before the fleet has to be ready to join the race.

Grateful for the short reprieve with Kai, Serena knows it won't occur too often during The Migration. Making a mental note to thank Liam and ensure he gets enough rest along the way as well, Serena scoots closer to Kai. Her head rests in the depression between his neck and bicep, and she wraps one arm around his waist.

She listens to Kai's deep breathes slowing until a slight whistle with each exhale lets Serena know he is asleep. She begins to drift off herself when Kai jerks in his sleep. Alert, Serena tunes into him. His breath comes faster now, and he jerks again. A combination of mumbling and moans bubble out from his lips.

Pushing herself up on one elbow, Serena looks at Kai. His eyelids flutter in deep sleep. The jerking grows more consistent until he has Serena in a painful squeeze. Riding the nightmare out with him, Serena leans into Kai. She murmurs back, just loudly enough to overtake his own whimpers. It lasts for several minutes until finally Kai settles back into a slow, rhythmic breathing pattern. He relaxes his hold on Serena but doesn't let go altogether.

Serena releases a breath she didn't know she had been holding. Squeezing her eyes shut, she bites her bottom lip. This was no ordinary nightmare. The Migration is going to be all that much more difficult because Serena knows the rock that supports her is cracking.

* * *

When Serena awakes, Kai is already up and rolling his mat. Shifting on her other side to face him, she searches for any sign of the stress that

plagued his sleep. If it's there, it is pushed behind the Queen's Guard façade.

"Good evening, moonshine." Kai winks at her.

Serena smiles, tucking unruly hair behind her ear. "Moonshine?"

"You know…" Kai pauses with mat only half rolled. "Instead of sunshine… because you are a maiden of the moon."

Serena continues to stare at him.

He shrugs. "Or I can just keep calling you 'Your Majesty'."

"You'll call me that." Serena rolls onto her back, folding her hands behind her head. "If you never want to sleep with me again."

"Oh, really?" Kai flops down next to Serena, his forgotten, half-rolled mat unrolling itself. Gathering Serena in his arms, they each lie on their sides, nose to nose. "Sleep with you? Or pair with you?"

Serena lowers her voice. "Do you want to pair again… already? I mean how often can maidens…?" Her sentence trails off, sounding stupid to her own ears.

Kai's lips graze Serena's, putting an end to the awkward moment. "As often as they want," he whispers back.

Responding more forcefully to his light touch, Serena presses her hips into his and she takes him by the mouth, rolling them both over so she is on top. Her tongue grazes his teeth as her loose, black hair falls around them like the night's veil. His scent fills their small cocoon, and for a moment, Serena can pretend they are safe in a cave of the Undine Kingdom, with nothing but each other to fill their time.

Sounds of the camp coming to life infiltrate the illusion. Kai and Serena break apart once they hear cooking fires being stamped out. She rolls off him, pushing her hair behind her shoulders. The ceiling of the tent comes into focus as they listen to Liam bark out orders for moving what supplies came off the ship back onboard.

"I suppose I should go help him," Serena says, but she doesn't move.

"Yes," Kai agrees. "I need to check in with the guard. I'm going to divide them up evenly amongst ships today." He doesn't move either.

"If possible, can you put at least two near the werewolf who killed Sasha?" Serena snuggles closer to Kai. If they discuss plans, at least they will feel productive.

"Why?" he asks. "Do you think he might try something?"

"No," Serena says, tilting her head back to look at Kai. "I think the maidens might."

Kai gives her a gentle squeeze. "Okay."

Moments of silence pass and more guilt settles in as they delay with helping the rest of the camp.

"Kai?" Serena asks.

"Hmm?" Sleepiness tinges his voice.

"When you fell asleep… did you have a nightmare?"

Kai's shoulders tighten and he hesitates just a moment too long before he answers. "A small one." He gives her a quick kiss on the forehead and pushes himself off the ground. "Nothing to worry about. Come on. Let's pack."

Serena watches as his hands fly into motion, rolling both their mats and gathering their small collection of things around the tent. He is avoiding more questions, and Serena lets the conversation pass for now. Tucking herself into a small corner of the tent to steer clear of Kai's whirlwind, Serena folds her unruly hair into a tight braid. By the time Kai unzips the tent and holds a flap open for her to step out, Serena at least looks ready to face the day.

She leaves Kai to finish breaking down the tent and glances around the camp, acknowledging maidens who curtsey as she passes. For the most part, the pack members ignore her. They seem busier, having more personal possessions like tents, blankets, and pillows to store on the boats. They have more food and personal grooming paraphernalia. Then there are the cooking pots, cigarettes, and extra changes of clothes.

"High maintenance," Serena mumbles to herself.

"Who is?"

Serena jumps at Liam's voice. She gives a nervous laugh as she recovers. "Your wolves are."

"More than you know." He smiles at her. There are dark circles under his eyes. "The racers haven't been spotted yet. But we expect to see the first of them in about an hour. We'll need to be packed and ready in time." He looks at the maidens. Most are standing or sitting in the surf just off the beach. "Soakin' it in?" Liam asks.

Serena nods. "This water is very similar to home. They know they won't see it again. Let them be—it will invigorate them for the long journey."

Serena and Liam watch as Kiera enters the water. She looks to have recovered a bit from her bout of seasickness, though she gives the boats bobbing up and down at the pier a weary glance. The green tinge is gone from her pink-purple cheeks. Wavy blonde curls hang loose at her shoulders. Treading tentatively into the chilled water, Kiera's azure eyes sparkle to life with each step. Once she is deep enough, she bends her knees until the ocean rushes over her shoulders. Translucent water turns into frothy white as a wave builds in front of Kiera. She dips below just as it breaks over her. Emerging on the other side, Kiera stands, thoroughly revitalized, with a wide smile on her face.

Maidens further out to sea turn and look, but their gazes drift past the wet strands of Kiera's hair to something behind her. She turns, and her smile dies on her lips. A pack member has entered the water. He stands at least a foot taller than Kiera, watching her from only a leap away. With locked eyes, the pair slowly circles each other. One of the closer maidens reach out for Kiera's hand, pulling her away from the man.

"It's Conner," Serena whispers to Liam. "He wouldn't hurt her, right?"

Liam shakes his head. "He's not there for her…"

Conner's eyes drift from Kiera to the ocean that surrounds him. Wind pulls water from the crest of a wave and spritzes him across the face. He runs his palm across his chin in wonder, and when he takes it away, Serena can see it is not only the ocean dripping from his cheeks but also tears.

"He never goes in the water," Liam explains, his voice cracking. "Most of us just… don't."

Conner's knees buckle. Lifting his chin high, he howls. Just before a wave washes over his head, Serena can see hair, pointy ears, and needle-like fangs emerging.

She isn't the only one to have seen it. Maidens run from the ocean, giving wide berth to the transforming wolf. Several nearby guards rush forward with their tridents, placing themselves between the wolf in the water and the retreating maidens.

Glancing down the beach, Serena sees that the chest that holds the tridents has been brought ashore and unlocked.

"He ain't gonna hurt no one," Liam shouts.

The water settles in between waves, and Conner breaks the surface, in full animal form. Panting, he turns to face the ring of guards around him. He emits a short whine at the shock of half a dozen tridents pointed at him.

Groups of wolves have gathered on the beach, but other than that, no one moves for fear of igniting a bloodbath. Serena feels a hand on her shoulder, and she turns to find Kai standing beside her.

"Kai—help."

Eyes trained on the wolf and his whole body tense, Kai moves forward. The setting sun flashes off Kai's trident, and Serena can't help but remember his night terrors—maybe he is the exact wrong person to diffuse the situation.

Joining the semi-circle of guards, Kai raises his trident, then points it at the wolf.

Liam steps forward.

Serena stops him with a quick grab at his arm. "Just wait."

Turning his head slightly to each guard beside him, Kai issues an order. Slowly, they lower their tridents and step back. Kai says the same to the guards on each end of the semi-circle. As they move away, the wolf licks his snout and wags his tail. When it is only Kai left, he and the wolf regard each other for several moments. Finally, Kai lowers his trident and his shoulders relax.

He gestures to the open ocean around them. "Enjoy her."

The wolf gives a short yip, then turns to jump into the next wave, kicking his hind legs up and out behind him. Kai rejoins Serena and Liam, who are now watching Conner's wolf roll along in the next wave.

"Thanks, man," says Liam. "I wasn't sure which way that was gonna go."

"Me either," says Kai. He turns to look at Liam. "And I am no man. I am Undine." With another glance back at the frolicking wolf, Kai stalks away.

"It's just an expression," Liam mumbles to Serena.

"He knows that," she says. She tears her eyes away from the ocean to look around.

Pack members are cheering Conner on—several have already decided to join him. Maidens continue to stay in tight groups, turning their backs to the wolves.

"Tensions are still too high," says Serena. "How is he able to transform anyway? Did he take your blood?"

"Conner would never," says Liam. "But if we are close enough to the full moon, and his system floods with emotion—any emotion—it can

happen."

"I don't know." Serena doubts their former decision. "Maybe we should separate them."

Liam shakes his head. "If we can't get them to make amends during The Migration, they never will once we reach Ivvavik and are able to establish separate domains." He rests his hand on Serena's shoulder, squeezing. "It's now or never, sister."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Serena leaves Liam to wrangle his wolves out of the water—she needs to make things right with her maidens. But when she approaches the pier, they are all already boarding the ships. They follow the same protocol as earlier, splitting themselves up among each vessel, and sticking to only one side once they are aboard.

Standing at the end of the pier, Serena watches as more maidens pass her. They give a slight curtsey in her direction but never make eye contact. It can't be outright labeled as disrespectful, but Serena can feel their cold shoulders as much as if she were laying her cheek on them.

The last of them board, and Serena is left staring at their backs, just as she did in her caste days as the youngest at the back of the formation. A lump of frustration filling her throat, Serena turns to look at the wolves. Their matted fur is sopping wet, but they look invigorated by the short romp in the sea. Dragging themselves toward the beach at Liam's insistence, they keep glancing back as if they are debating which call takes precedence.

Colin, Darcy, and their boys emerge from the tent set up for the family. As their parents are occupied with breaking down camp, the boys take the opportunity to rush into the water themselves. The newcomers give the wolves an excuse to reignite the mad scuffle for last minute ocean fun. From across the beach Liam gives Serena his best 'what-can-I-do' shrug, then takes off his shirt and joins his pack mates.

Watching her brother tackle another wolf directly into a large, breaking wave Serena boards the tugboat, the vessel that contains the most maidens. She continues to watch the wolves, smiling and laughing every now and then. She waits until she can see most of the other maidens watching as well, then she turns to face them.

Serena points to the open ocean behind her. "They deserve to say goodbye to her, too," she says, looking from maiden to maiden. Her gaze falls on the healer who refused to share her stock of ginger with the wolves. "And they deserve our medicine when they are sick."

The healer gives Serena a sharp glance, then trains her eyes back on the floor in front of her.

"What they deserve," a small voice slips out from the back of the ship, "is retribution."

Stepping around webbed feet, Serena moves closer to the maiden that spoke out. Orange scales glimmer under the setting sun as Sophia straightens her back and looks Serena in the eye. "They killed my sister."

"And our king—your father," says the maiden next to Sophia.

Serena addresses the easiest concern first. "Were my father still alive, he would have never agreed to The Migration." Serena fixes the maiden with her best Nerin-like stare. "And we would have died in the caves beside him of starvation or sickness within a year."

The maiden flinches at Serena's sharp words.

Taking a deep breath, Serena turns to Sophia, forcing a softer tone into her voice. "Sasha was the only one of my caste mates who was ever nice to me."

Sophia blinks, and the sharp lines of her cheekbones diminish.

"Sasha was brave, kind, and she didn't give a damn about labels or vengeance or who deserves what. And you probably know that better than anyone."

A slow sigh leaves Sophia's mouth, and her shoulders sag.

"If Sasha were here today, how would she have handled this?" asks Serena.

Eyes drifting out to the wolves playing in the water, Sophia's quivering chin slowly turns into a smile. "She'd be out there, playing with them." Sophia looks back at Serena. "I wish she were here…"

The last of the sun sinks behind the ocean, flashing in farewell across the waves. One especially high crest in the middle of the pack of wolves catches the light. When the swell curls in on itself, it almost looks like a scaled, orange tail. Both of the maidens suck in a breath as they see it.

Serena and Sophia exchange a smile. "She is there—with them," says Serena. "Right where you knew she'd be."

Reaching out, Sophia squeezes Serena's hand. "Thank you. I'll… try harder."

"It would be appreciated," Serena answers. She turns to address the rest of the maidens. "These are our sons. We cast them away for their own survival, though some didn't see it that way. I'm asking you to separate the heinous crimes of a few from the rest of the pack. I'm telling you, what they really deserve is… us." Serena raises her voice so those on the other

ships can hear her. "They deserve to see who the Painted Maidens truly are."

"And who are we, Serena?" Evandre says with pleading eyes. "A bunch of… homeless sirens, who get seasick for Poseidon's sake."

"Yes." Serena nods with new energy in her movements. She crosses the deck and points to Evandre. "Exactly. We are homeless." She moves back to point at Sophia. "We are grieving."

From the stern of the boat, pinkish-purple Kiera raises a shaky hand. "We are sick."

"We are low on ginger," mumbles the healer.

Serena ignores the healer because there are more shouts.

"We are fragile," says Sarafina.

"We smell like fish!"

A round of laughter bubbles up.

One of the maidens still looking out at the werewolves speaks. "We gave up our sons."

Laying a hand on her shoulder, another consoles her.

"We were desperate." She looks at Serena. "We still *are* desperate."

"We are too judgmental."

"We are too formal."

"We are chained," says Arista from the next boat over, in a sing-song voice.

Serena gives the maiden a weary look, but amidst more shouting, she moves off the boat to cross the pier, and jumps aboard again next to Arista. Removing the key from the dry bag tied around her waist, Serena undoes the lock. The chains drop to the ground, a heavy clunk putting an end to the shouts.

Serena looks up to find everyone watching her. "You are all right—we are all of those things. But this is a new beginning for the Undine. And we can be so much more than we ever were."

Stepping onto the side of the boat so all of the maidens can see and hear her, Serena speaks up. "So let the wolves see everything. Let them see our faults. But let's also show them our strengths." Wavering slightly, Serena steadies herself on a rope. "And we can't do that if we are constantly turning our backs to them."

No one speaks up, but Serena takes that as a good sign. No one is disagreeing.

"I'm not asking you to wrap them in hugs as soon as they board. But I am asking you…" Serena trails off, looking at Sophia. "To try harder."

The maidens don't get a chance to respond. The first of the wolves filter down the pier and onto the ships.

Serena hops down from the boat to meet Liam.

"Did you enjoy your swim?" she asks.

Shaking his head to rid his hair of extra water, Liam smiles. "Yeah—I think we all did."

"There are better ways to do that, you know." Serena gestures to the torn fabric in his hand.

"Oh, right." Lifting his ripped shirt to dry his hair, Liam grimaces. "Wonder if there will be any seamstress on this race."

"Wait." Serena grabs the torn material. It is bright red, the same color as the ribbons tied to an arrow that will signal for Undine reinforcements. "How do we plan on communicating amongst the vessels during the race?"

"We can't risk using radios in case one of the Ungainly ships is listenin' in on our broadcast." Liam shrugs. "We don't have enough satellite phones and there is no cell signal most of the way."

"I know how we can do it," says Serena. "But I need more material in several different colors."

"You heard her," Liam turns to his pack mates. "Hand over the ripped clothes."

A large pile of scrap material starts to grow at Serena's feet.

Liam takes a step back so as not to get submerged in it. "I hope you can sew."

"Well." Serena thinks. "I am pretty good at stringing together seashell necklaces."

"Seriously?" asks Liam.

"I've got a steady hand, your majesty," Sarafina offers, giving a quick curtsey before bending to select several torn shirts in the same purple hues. "Do you have the tools needed?"

"Here," says Simone, dragging the other two healers along with her. "We brought plenty of needle and thread for sutures—hopefully, we won't be needing them."

Undine working groups for each ship are cobbled together with enough material to make signals in a variety of colors; red for an emergency, blue

for maidens in the water, white for rough waters ahead, plus several others Serena and Liam think they may need during the race.

"Smoke! It's the signal!" Conner shouts from the cockpit of the sailboat, pointing to a grey plume rising into the sky. "The first racer has been spotted!"

There is a flurry of feet—both webbed and hairy, as everyone rushes to get themselves and the supplies on a boat.

"What order are we going in again?" Serena asks Liam as they both scramble to gather the last scraps of material.

"Sailboat—it is the fastest and won't draw suspicion if it is among the first of the racers to come in," he says. "Then the center console fishin' boat. It isn't particularly fast, but it is most likely to sink. I figure it'd be better with more of us comin' up behind it to help if that happens."

Serena nods. "Put more maidens on that one, and only a few wolves. No more than they can manage to help in the sea. You'll remember how many of us it took to hold up you and Aiden in that storm?"

"I'm not likely to forget that incident—in this lifetime or the next. Anyway, the cabin cruiser and trawler will come next, with the tugboat last. It can hold more people and pick up any strays the other boats lose along the way."

"Hopefully that won't be the case," says Serena. She nods to the end of the boat. "I'll be on the tug, then. I want to make sure nobody gets left behind. And Conner seems confident enough with the route—he'll remain on the sailboat?"

"Yep," says Liam. He lowers his voice. "I'll stay in the middle on the trawler—and continue to keep an eye on your Sophia."

"I honestly don't think it's necessary anymore," says Serena. She pauses, then nods. "But that works for now."

"All maidens and guards accounted for and aboard the ship," says Kai, joining Liam and Serena. "Except you, your majesty."

"And the werewolves?" asks Serena.

Kai looks from Serena to Liam and back again. "I… didn't count them." He points to Liam. "I figured—"

"Would you mind?" Serena interrupts.

Kai's hand drops to his side. "We need to leave if we are going to catch up with the racers."

Serena crosses her arms. Kai sighs but turns to the first ship.

"And Kai?" Serena holds out her hand.

He hesitates only a moment before passing over the key to the trident trunk. "All are returned and locked."

"Thank you," says Serena, her voice cold.

After Kai returns to the counting task, Liam clears his throat. "We'd better get ourselves on board," says Liam, turning toward the trawler. "Fair winds, Serena."

"Following seas," she finishes the traditional mariner's farewell.

It will only be a few hours of sailing before the racers pull into the next port, retiring for the night, and it is certainly the easiest leg of the entire race. But Serena can't seem to calm the nerves in her midsection. She boards the tugboat with one hand on her stomach, as if she can physically push away her anxiety.

Kai finishes counting the wolves and waves his hand for the all clear. Serena nods and waits until he boards the sailboat before she issues the command. "All ahead full!" Her voice bellows over the sound of crashing waves.

Leaving the pier in the order they will race, the sailboat pulls away first, carrying Conner, Kai, and an even mix of Undine and werewolves. The rest of the ships follow, one by one. Serena's tugboat falls into line as the last boat. The sight of the vessels lined up, carrying almost all of her people straight into one of the most treacherous races on earth is too much for her to bear.

She turns to look at those on her boat. Several of the Undine are busy piecing together material for their communication flags. One maiden runs out of the bright red needed for the emergency signal—the flag only stands half the size it needs to be. On her knees searching through the pile of scrap material, the maiden stops as a piece of red material is held out, right in front of her face. She rises to find one of the pack mates has taken his shirt off his back. It isn't even ripped.

Slowly, the maiden takes the offered material, nodding her head in thanks. Not a word is exchanged, but it is the most cordiality Serena has seen between the two groups yet.

Further down the line, Sophia's eyes are trained on the area where she spotted a glimpse of orange scales. She is still hoping for another sign of her sister.

Turning back to the line of boats, Serena pulls her shoulders back and lifts her chin. Poseidon has yet to grace The Migration, but at least they now know Sasha has.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The two maidens that were sent to watch for the first racers at the northern most end of the island have now doused the signal fire with wet leaves, and the smoke grows whiter in color. It is time for the first boat to merge onto the racecourse. Unfurling its longest sail, the boat picks up speed. In no time at all, Serena can no longer make out Kai's silhouette at the stern of the ship. It rounds the corner of the island and disappears from view. A noticeable buzz of tension runs up and down the lines of both the werewolves and Undine on Serena's boat.

The color of the smoke once again changes to a brownish grey—the result of more wood, and the center console fishing boat lurches forward, causing the maidens on board to grab the handrails in consternation.

One by one, each vessel vanishes around the northern end of the island, until only the tug is left. When the smoke changes for the final time, the motor revs and the entire ship shudders. Slowly, it inches forward. All of the seasick patients, werewolf and Undine alike, have been grouped and positioned in the center of the deck.

As the boat picks up speed, there are groans from the sick. Serena furrows her eyebrows in sympathy as she watches the pinkish-purple hue on Kiera's face disappear into a sheen of white. Darcy, self-assigned to the boat because of the patients, sees the same. Rising up from the side of a pack member, Darcy takes Kiera by the hand and leads her to the front of the boat, positioning her at the bow facing the sea.

"For the view?" Serena asks Darcy once she returns.

"It is the smoothest spot on the boat," says Darcy. "It should help subside the seasickness, and hers is one of the worst cases."

The pair turns back to the rest of the patients, judging severity simply by the color of their faces. It is difficult when half of them are mostly covered in facial hair, and the other half sport the colors of the rainbow. Undine healers move among the sick, allowing maidens to sip ginger potion from their flasks. Those same flasks are tucked out of sight every time a healer gets close to a sick pack member.

Darcy raises her eyebrow at Serena.

"I'm working on it," says Serena under her breath.

Nodding, Darcy fixes her gaze at her feet, pressing her lips together as if she is struggling to not say something. Finally, she takes a deep breath and looks at Serena. "I have my own medicines that will be depleted by the end of tomorrow. I didn't expect this from so many. But if the seasickness continues past that, my guys will be in danger of becoming severely weakened and dehydrated."

As if on cue, a pack member stands and races for the side of the boat to expel the contents of his stomach. Serena and Darcy have to jump back to keep from being run over in the process.

"We just barely got started today." Serena stares at his heaving shoulders in wonder.

"Yes, well, I'm expecting some of them will recover, but some won't." Darcy walks over to the sick wolf and, once he is done, leads him up to the front of the boat, depositing him right next to Kiera.

After the ocean incident, Kiera gives the werewolf a weary look, but they are both too miserable to do anything about each other.

The last pine trees on the island pass, needles blowing in the wind as if to wave farewell. Occupants on the side of the boat spot shimmering scales in the water. It is the maidens who had signal duty. After putting out the fire, they are racing to catch up to the tug.

"Get the ropes out!" shouts Serena. "Slow it down a bit!"

Her message is relayed to the bridge, and her maidens are on their feet at her command, but they are lost as to how to operate on a boat. Their hands hang by their side, useless and idle.

"Come about!" The werewolves are up, too, and they know what to do. "Throw the lines!"

Ropes are tossed to a pack member standing atop the wheelhouse. He wraps them around the main mast then throws the slack back down. Wound into tight balls, two other pack members take aim and toss the lines. Uncoiling as they sail through the air, the ropes cover a surprising distance. When the maidens grab hold, the line goes taut.

Every pack member who is able grasps the ropes and pulls in coordinated bursts. The maidens fly into the air gripping the knotted ends of the rope.

Pack members continue to pull. Having donated material for the flags, most of them are shirtless. Shoulders and arms bulge each time they heave in the lines. The pack member still at the main mast is shouting commands

while watching the maidens come in at speeds faster than they could swim. "Heave and hold! Steady! One final pull—and heave!"

Pack members at the ropes back up until they hit the other side of the boat, forcing maidens to jump out of the way. Everyone lifts their chins, watching two scaled Undine turning somersaults in the air. Arcing over the water, they begin to descend just as the boat moves underneath them. Pale skin overtakes the colored blur as they transform into legs in midair. Serena can hear several awed gasps from the pack members closest to her.

The maidens land on the deck, one solid thump followed closely by the next. Feet shoulder width apart, they look up, eyes going wide in surprise. They are surrounded by pack members holding the ropes that pulled them in.

The pack member closest to the maidens clears his throat. "Welcome aboard," he says before turning his back to recoil the lines. The rest take his lead, retreating to their side of the tug.

One of the maidens opens her mouth. "We thank you for your—"

A nudge from her partner cuts her off.

Crimson flares at the maiden's cheeks, and she turns her back to the wolves, joining her own group. Blending in with the Undine stitching together flags, she steals indiscreet glances at the pack.

Busying themselves with coiling rope and mopping the deck of excess water, pack members do the same to the maidens.

If only this race were about ten years longer, thinks Serena. *Then we might make some progress.*

"Boats ahead!" the shout comes from the wheelhouse. Just as the bow of the ship turns, heading into Queen Charlotte Sound, another ship ahead and behind come into view—both of them Ungainly racers. Most of the maidens and pack members on the tug sit so their heads are below the rails. Hopefully curious Ungainlies, especially those with binoculars, won't realize how many bodies are aboard the tug. It wouldn’t do to attract that kind of attention. Only Kiera and her sick counterpart at the bow, the pack members in the wheelhouse, and Serena stay visible. Darcy passes Serena a hooded sweatshirt, and Serena reluctantly pulls the itchy material over her head.

After making her rounds to provide a few necessities to those who can't move about as freely, Serena surveys the racecourse. Large peninsulas stretch into the ocean like lazy fingers atop blue silk while tiny islands dot

the clear water further out to sea. A bank of white clouds roll over the landscape, and as Serena looks up, she feels as though she is back home staring up at the frothy turmoil as a swell lifts then breaks overhead.

Taking a deep breath, Serena pulls herself from The Deep and focuses on her purpose above the water. If she squints, she can just make out the top masts of the wooden trawler holding more of her people. Within minutes it is completely out of sight and she is left with only Ungainly ships to stare at, one ahead and one behind. They are unimpressive trawlers, probably used for commercial fishing on a regular basis.

Behind her one of Darcy's boys complains of boredom. In front, at the bow, the seasick werewolf passes his bottle of fresh water to Kiera. Serena tugs at the itchy sweatshirt, contemplating sitting for a few minutes of rest. Dry flakes flutter to the deck. Her body is already feeling the effects of being absent from the water too long.

When the racers stop for the day at Penrose Island, the plan is for only a few pack members to accompany the boats to check in and join the Ungainly camp for the night. The rest of the pack members will remain hidden on the boats while the Undine will swim on their own up the race course to Hecate Island, which lies further out to sea. While Serena feels obliged to remain close to the group with the Ungainlies, she may have to accompany her maidens for a refreshing plunge in dark waters.

"The flags are complete, your majesty," says Sarafina.

Serena turns at the announcement to maidens holding up several colored flags. Red, blue, white, green, and orange. Serena points to one that appears to be concocted from dozens of different flannel shirts. "What does that one mean?"

The two Undine holding the flag train their eyes to the deck. Serena crosses her arms, waiting.

Clearing her throat, one of the maidens briefly meets Serena's gaze. "We thought it could be a signal for… rogue werewolf."

"Do you have intelligence suggesting this event will occur?" asks Serena.

"Well, they are werewolves…" says Sarafina under her breath. "Besides, it will comfort us to know our sisters on the other boats have a way to warn us."

Serena sighs, but looking over the maidens nods her reluctant agreement.

"A signal!" shouts a pack member from the wheelhouse.

Maidens pop up on their feet running for the bow.

"Stay down!" Serena hisses.

But the excitement of the first signal overtakes their caution for obscurity. Pressing forward into the two seasick passengers, maidens point straight ahead. The trawler carrying wolves and maidens is back in view now that the sailing route has straightened out. Serena joins the group and squints her eyes.

"Blue!" Kiera yells from the front. "I see a blue flag."

"Maidens in the water." The meaning of the signal is muttered throughout the group.

"It means Penrose Island, the first stop must be ahead," says Serena. "We part ways for the night here. Maidens will proceed to Hecate Island. Pack members are to remain with the boats."

Occupants on the boat scurry to action while the maidens rush to clean up from their sewing circles and secure their dry bags around their waists.

Serena looks over the port side of the boat. A wave of excitement runs through her with the anticipation of diving into the cool, blue water.

"For Poseidon's sake," muttering from a nearby healer catches Serena's attention. She is frantically groping through her dry bag. Untying it from her waist, she dumps the entire thing out. Bandages flutter to the deck while vials clink together.

"What is it?" asks Serena, bending down next to the healer.

"My entire stock of hydrocoral," she says, turning each vial so she can see the labels. She looks up at Serena. "It has been stolen." Her gaze flutters to the pack members lining the other side of the boat.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Are you sure? When was the last time you saw it?" asks Serena.

"Back on Hope Island. I had all my vials spread out in the sick area. I was in a rush to pack up so I didn't have time to account for them then." The healer lowers her voice. "In powder form, it looks a lot like ground-up ginger." With fire in her eyes, the healer takes a step toward the pack members.

"Wait." Serena holds an arm out, blocking the healer's path. Serena takes one last, longing look at the water. "We can't just outright blame them. There is no proof. I will stay with the wolves and find out."

The healer doesn't budge.

"I will search their belongings if I have to." Serena's arm remains steadfast, and she assumes her best royalty voice. "Go with the maidens. Now."

"As you say." The healer gathers her spilled belongings and ties the dry bag to her waist. Turning to step up onto the railing, she glances one more time at the pack members, then at Serena. Finally, she jumps and dives into the water, far enough to steer clear of the boat's motor.

Serena watches the light-green scales glide away just under the surface of the water. Ignoring the pang of jealousy in her gut, Serena turns to the wolves, practicing what she is going to say in head.

Who stole the hydrocoral?

An outright accusation might trigger a revolt.

If anyone might have taken a vial thinking it was ginger, please return it as I look away.

Mother Rayne would do the same with young calflings.

Clearing her throat, Serena catches the attention of a few of the closest pack members.

"Prefer to run with the wolves than swim with the mermaids?" Colin, Darcy's husband, asks.

"Not really," she says. "Our healer seems to have… misplaced an important vial. It has an orange powdery substance inside. Would you please pass the word that if it is found it should be returned to me immediately?"

"Will do. But just so you know" —Colin points where the maidens sat — "not one of us have ventured to the other side."

Behind her, the last of the maidens splash into the water, and relief runs down the line of pack members. Serena can't help but feel a bit of the relief herself with the tension no longer there. Her shoulders relax, and she unclenches fists she didn't even realize were in tight balls.

"Green flag!" shouts the wolf at the bow. "Land ahead."

Most of the wolves crawl across the deck to make their way down below. All ships have slowed their speed and are a tighter group, which means they are more likely to observe details on other boats.

"So what will it be now?" asks Colin. "Wolves or humans?"

The piers are coming into view, and Serena can already spot the sailboat Kai is on tied to the docks. Male Undine lack the vibrant colors of the maidens and would be more successful blending in with Ungainlies, or so the Undine theory goes. Kai and one other guard will be passing themselves off as crew members of the sailboat, along with three pack members.

"I don't think Ungainlies take too well to blue faces," says Serena.

"Sure they do. Smurfs, Cookie Monster, Mystique, The Blue Man Group…" Colin trails off at Serena's blank stare. "None of which you probably know."

Serena turns, throwing one of the ropes to a pack member waiting on the dock. Several other pack members have already secured their boats and are leaving the docks to set up camp for the night. One of them is Xavier, the wolf who killed Sophia's sister. Serena's eyes fall to a cylindrical object bulging from his pocket. Eyes pinned on him, she moves forward as the tugboat bumps into the dock. He disappears into the trees. When Ungainly voices and laughter filter out from the staging area, Serena stops in her tracks. She will have to leave the Ungainlies to the wolves and the Queen's Guard, for now. It will be a different story once the moon rules the night.

* * *

Rising to its place in the sky, the alloy-silver moon remains suspended and surrounded by thousands of stars, their pinpricks of light mere scatterings. Swaths of moonlight blaze over the water, lighting up the sea

like melted platinum. The swell and sigh of the waves is a haunting lullaby.

Below deck on the tugboat, Serena rises to her feet. She tiptoes around sleeping pack members until she feels the warmth of the moonlight bloom across her face from the open porthole above.

Shifting at her feet catches her attention before she can ascend the ladder well.

"You are going?" asks Colin. He sits up and rubs his eyes, careful not to disturb his sleeping boy around him. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Serena shrugs and whispers, "I'll just say I'm The Blue Man Group."

"There needs to be two more of you…" he mumbles as he rolls over, pulling his blanket over his head.

Ignoring him, Serena climbs the steep stairs and takes a deep breath of fresh, salty air. It is a preferable change to the stale smell of wolf that lingers below deck. A few moments later, her feet hit the solid wood of the docks, and she retracts every last one of her scales, pulling the itchy hood of her sweatshirt tighter until her most prominent features are shadowed in dark.

Besides the sleeping wolves hidden below deck on the five ships from Doug's rental business, the docks are deserted. Serena glides past Ungainly ships that sway on gentle waves, and she stays on her toes as she makes the transition from planks to earth, darting up the hill toward the campground. Scattered camp fires emit a subtle glow, guiding her to the most heavily populated section. Even at this late hour there are still voices talking in low tones as racers huddle around fires, regaling their adventures of the day.

Slipping in and out of tents, Serena uses her nose to guide her to the pack. Finally, she spots the same tent her and Kai slept in on Hope Island. There are six more around it signifying her people's camp spot.

Now all I have to do is find that vial.

Pausing by each tent, Serena stops to listen. Several reveal snoring wolves, but the next one she comes to is silent. Moving around to the front, she slowly pulls down the zipper and peers inside. Once her eyes adjust to the darkness, she glances around. The tent is empty. Pulling the zipper down the rest of the way, Serena slips inside and immediately starts routing through bags and clothes.

She freezes when footsteps approach her tent. Squeezing her eyes shut, Serena prays. *Poseidon let him pass, Poseidon let him pass.*

The footsteps pause at the opening to the tent that hangs partly open and Serena is plunged into darkness as an exaggerated shadow is cast by the fire behind him. Lifting his hand to the opened flap, the man mumbles. "What in the h—?"

"Xavier! It's your deal!" interrupts someone from the fire.

The form just outside the tent turns. "I need another jacket."

"No way, last time you had bulky sleeves I swear you were cheatin'. We'll build up the fire."

"Come on, man. I'm cold."

"You go into that tent then you're out of the game!"

"Oh, fine," Xavier grumbles, and the large shadow lurking over Serena falls away as he returns to his cards.

Frantic fingers resume their search once she is safe to make noise again. Finally, they close around a leather belt. Serena feels her way to the front of the pants the belt is looped through, and sticks her hand in one pocket and then the other. Smooth glass hits the palm of her hand, and she pulls out an Undine vial.

"Thank you, Poseidon," she whispers, sticking her head out of the flap. Confirming the coast is clear, Serena shimmies close to the tent around to the back. Stepping backward, Serena keeps an eye on the card players around the fire. There are several Ungainlies participating in the game, too.

A small glowing object bounces against her chest. Serena looks down and holds up the necklace Danny gave her. The Undine's hair is lit.

"What—?" One more step back, and Serena bumps into a warm body. Turning, she covers her mouth before she can emit a sound. Another hooded figure, of the same height and build, releases her own gasp. "Your majesty?!" She pulls back her hood, revealing full lips and an angled face framed with bright red scales along the side.

"Simone." Serena pulls on the healer's arm until they are both well away from the tents and crouching behind bushes. "What are you doing here?"

"I should ask the same of you," booms a low voice behind them.

This time Serena does gasp—and Simone screams.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Trust me, I am not the scariest thing out here." The figure crouches, and light from a nearby fire splashes across his face.

"Liam!" Serena and Simone say together as they both frown at him.

"Everything alright back there?" A passing Ungainly has stopped, peering into the woods.

Liam stands up, clearing his throat while the maidens duck further behind the bushes. "Yeah. I, uh, thought I saw a mouse."

"A mouse?" the Ungainly says, voice dry.

"Um…yep," says Liam.

"We have a tough course to traverse tomorrow," the Ungainly reminds Liam of some of the more realistic dangers. "Racers are sleeping, keep it down, will ya?"

"Will do. Sorry about that." Liam watches the Ungainly move on then reaches down to pull Serena up to eye level. "If you would have gone any further into the woods you would have come to the bathrooms they have set up back there."

"Ew," says Simone, standing next to Serena.

"I'm telling you that because this is a high traffic area. It's why we set up tents here—to get as much intel as we could on the other racers." Liam looks behind him. "You can't be here."

Escorting both maidens back toward the tent, it is only then that Serena hears a group of men tromping through the forest toward them.

"Here," Liam whispers. "Get in my tent until I come and get you." He unzips the flap and pushes both maidens inside. "Do not, for any reason whatsoever, come out until I return. It will be a few hours before the camp is quiet enough." Liam retracts his head and zips up the flap without an apology for his rough treatment.

"That was almost not appropriate," says Simone inside the tent.

Serena smiles at her. "He is just looking out for us." She glances around at the contents inside the tent. One duffel bag, one sleeping bag. Liam has the space to himself so they don't need to worry about anyone else walking in. Hopefully. "Come on, we can at least lie down and get some rest."

Kicking aside the sleeping bag, the maidens make themselves comfortable on hard ground. After complaints of the annoying nylon tent floor, Simone settles herself. But sleep is hard to come by for either of them. Liam was right—his tent is directly in the middle of a high traffic area. Booted feet constantly stomping by put Serena on edge.

Attempting to distract both of them, Serena turns to Simone. "Why are you here?" she whispers.

"My hydrocoral was stolen," says Simone.

"Yours too?"

Simone looks at Serena with wide eyes.

"Same with the healer on my boat. I told her I'd search the pack members' things, discreetly, as she was sure it was them."

"I think it was, too. But I haven't had any luck finding evidence. What about you?"

"As a matter of fact…" Serena sits up and fishes the glass vial from her dry bag. "I found this."

"Which is it?" Simone sits up, taking the vial from Serena and popping out the cork. Putting her nose to the edge, she sniffs cautiously. "Ginger. It is gone now," Simone turns the vial upside down, tapping it into her palm. A few remaining flakes drift down and she pops them in her mouth. "Yes, definitely ginger. At Hope Island, we put our ginger in small herb bags so they could be handed out in correct doses. So this vial would have been empty. Why would a wolf want an empty vial?" Simone purses her lips. "But our hydrocoral is still missing. Why would a wolf want hydrocoral?"

"Why are you so sure it was a wolf?" asks Serena. "Oh—shh."

Two men have stopped directly outside the tent. Serena and Simone go still, holding their breath. The precaution is unnecessary. The men are involved in a heated discussion.

"I'm telling you, it is too dangerous. We need to call off the race." The speaker is shorter than the other and his voice deeper.

"Keep your voice down, Smith. Do you know how much trouble we've had keeping this annual race open? And this year we have more racers than ever! If we call off the race now, those entries might never return."

"That storm keeps gaining strength, and we'll cross paths right at the height of it."

The men cease talking as someone else passes on his way to the outhouses. Once they are clear, the larger man sighs. "I'll speak to

waterway authorities first thing in the morning, but if they don’t forbid us to race, I very much doubt I'll be calling it off."

"At the expense of everyone's life?"

"Quit being so dramatic…" their voices trail off as they walk away.

Serena and Simone exchange a glance.

"A big storm?" asks Simone.

"We can deal with bad weather," says Serena.

"Yes, when we are under the sea. I just don't know how we'll fair above it." Simone lies down, folding her hands behind her head.

Serena does the same and they fall silent listening to snatches of conversation around them. The camp has begun to settle, and with less foot traffic, they can hear those around the campfires talking.

"What do you do with that boat of yours when you aren't racing it?" one man asks his neighbor.

"I contract out to clean up oil spills."

"Oh yeah?"

"Pay is alright—and it keeps me sailing. Been cleaning up from a spill a month back. There are still some slicks floating around from it. Watch for them on the race course."

Across the fire, another conversation is taking place. "What do you do when you aren't racing in the arctic, Jimmy?"

"I'm bush pilot," says another man. He has a strong Russian accent.

"What is a bush pilot?" asks Liam. It is the first time since he left Serena has heard his voice.

"I fly impossible missions. We go inhospitable regions, areas with rough terrain or no landing strips, or in dangerous conditions."

"Why would you do that?" asks Liam.

There is a pause—only the crackling fire can be heard. Finally, Jimmy answers, "The money is good. Besides, what else am I going to do?"

Laughter breaks out from the circle of men.

"Seriously," says Jimmy. "I like adventure. I like crazy people I meet and stories they tell."

"Like what?" asks Liam.

"Oh, stories about adventures they've had. Some are true and some twisted fairy tales. Fun, exotic creatures—"

"Creatures?" Serena can imagine Liam's head popping up. "What kind of creatures?"

"Dragons, trolls, vampires."

Simone leans over to Serena. "We're not fun?"

"Shh." Serena smiles, nudging her.

"But my favorite," says Jimmy. "Is story about animals meeting in a cave."

There is a long pause as if Jimmy is judging his audience for their interest. No one protests, and the fire is still strong, so he begins, "Once upon time, all animals looked the same… on inside. Each year they gather at a sacred cave deep in forest to celebrate their unity. Together, they would take off their skins. Raven shed feathers, bear his fur, and salmon her scales."

Serena and Simone look at each other as the man's words hang in the air over them like stale smoke.

"Stripped of their separate identities," continues Jimmy. "They rejoiced in their unity and danced together."

"Naked dancing?" one man interrupts. "Hell, I'm in!"

Laughter kicks up again, and Jimmy gives an appropriate pause before he resumes the story. "But one day, human comes and laughs at what he sees. Embarrassed, the animals run, and that was the last time they revealed themselves this way."

No one speaks for a long time. Finally, someone spits into the fire. "And that's the end of the story?"

"Yes, sir," says Jimmy.

"Bummer ending."

"I think it holds a good lesson," says Liam. "Underneath our disguises, we can appreciate all we have in common with each other."

Serena looks at Simone, and she can't be sure, but she can almost see a glimmer of wet tears on Simone's cheeks.

"If we could learn to drop our skins," says Liam. "Whether we are human or one of your exotic creatures, and just… dance."

"Here, here!" The group grows loud and rambunctious. Someone pulls out a fiddle and begins to play. Shadows cast onto the tent by the fire reveal dancing men.

Inside the tent, Serena and Simone cannot share in the enthusiasm. Sharp, angled faces and skin tinged with different hues, not to mention their scaled bodies—they would never be accepted in an Ungainly society. Extending her fingertips, Serena finds Simone's hand and they interlock

fingers as they lie dead still staring up at the tent ceiling, listening to the music, dancing, and laughter around them.

The party does not last long. Angry campers who are trying to sleep shout their protests. The music stops, and the fire is doused as men depart to their own tents.

Several minutes of complete silence go by before the flap to the tent door is unzipped. "It's clear," whispers Liam. His voice is respectfully somber, as if he is sympathizing with the maidens.

Serena and Simone rise from their places and follow Liam, gliding silently through the camp. They encounter no one else until they get to the docks.

"Should I be expectin' any more scaled surprises tonight?" he asks, crossing his arms.

"Not unless your pack gets hungry for fish, Liam of Clan Werich," Serena shoots back.

"Fine," he growls.

"Fine." She can growl like the best of them. She turns to Simone. "Which boat were you on?"

"The sailboat. But if it is okay I'd prefer to be on the tug with the rest of the seasick patients. I think I can help them."

"As you say." Serena nods her permission.

"Thank you, your majesty," Simone says, leaving to board the tugboat.

Serena turns back to Liam. "Will you stay on the trawler again tomorrow?"

"Yes, keeping an eye on Sophia."

"You should know, someone has taken the hydrocoral stock from two of my healers." Serena crosses her arms. "That is why both Simone and I were at camp tonight. We have reason to believe it was a wolf."

"Hydro-what?" Liam raises an eyebrow. "And why do you suspect the wolves?"

"Well, for one, I spotted a vial in the pocket of the very wolf Sophia is watching. And then I found it in his tent. Turns out it was ginger, which happens to look a lot like hydrocoral."

"I'll have words with him," says Liam.

"Thank you," says Serena. "And thank you for helping us tonight." After one last look at Liam, Serena follows Simone onto the tugboat.

Below deck, Simone pauses at the end of the ladder well. "What is that smell?" she asks.

"Sleeping wolf." Serena, glances around at the bodies covering almost every inch of the floor. "Just… imagine them in the story, shedding their fur. Under their skin they are just like you."

Directly in front of them, one of the pack members rolls over and farts.

Simone presses her lips together and glares at Serena.

"Come on," says Serena. We'll just sleep up on the deck tonight."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Crew members of the Capital to Capital boat race, whether Ungainly, Undine, or werewolf are up at the sun's first light. Each ship is prepped, the courses are charted, and the expected finish times at the end of the day are reported to race officials.

Serena is in the wheelhouse of the tug, consulting with the pilot. "Why do you need to give expected finish times?" she asks.

"It's how we win the race. Each ship estimates their finish time for the course that day. We aren't supposed to have any timepieces or instruments that measure distance or speed on the boat." As he speaks crew members are pulling heavy canvas over the instrument panel. "The crew that has the best average for estimating their time wins the race."

"We're not really hoping to win, are we?" asks Serena.

The captain shrugs. "We're here. Why not play the game? And if we are handed that trophy in the end, so be it."

"Pure gold, that thing is, or so I've heard," another pack member charting maps speaks up.

"Of which I'm sure you'll find many uses in secluded Ivvavik National Park," mumbles Serena.

Footsteps ping against the ladder well leading up to the wheelhouse. Serena turns to find Liam, already sweaty from doing… whatever werewolves do when they prepare to launch a boat.

"We are about to cast off," he tells Serena. "I'll stay on the trawler, and Kai is moving to the center console. Do you want to be with him for this leg of the trip?"

Looking out the window, down onto the deck, Serena sees Simone and the other healer emerging from the ladder well with their hoods on, whispering but making sharp gestures with their hands. Finally, the healer reaches into her dry bag and hands Simone a pouch. After a quick nod, Simone hurries to the bow where Kiera and the seasick wolf have already placed themselves. Serena recognizes the small pouch as individual ginger portions. Following it closely with hers eyes, she watches it move from Simone's hand to the pack member. Smiling, Kiera hands him a water bottle.

"Well?" Liam asks, still awaiting her answer.

"Our people on the tug are going to be okay." She looks across the pier to the center console. It is the boat most likely to succumb to harsh conditions, so only maidens board it, with the exception of the pilot and his navigator. It would be a selfish move to sit with Kai for a day. Serena catches his eye, giving him a slight wave. *I am okay. And you?*

Kai waves back.

She smiles and turns to Liam. "I think I will take the sailboat today."

After a few more words about the course of navigation for the day, and the plan to board the maidens while sailing past Hecate Island, Serena leaves the tug to board the sailboat. The two large sails are being unrolled and checked for tears and weak spots. Three other pack members stand on deck while eight wait patiently below before they are safe from Ungainly eyes to emerge.

"Her majesty is with us today?" asks a pack member.

Serena turns to find Doug. She gives a slight curtsey. "If you'll have me."

"We'll have you alright, but there are rules. First, we've got no time for formality. Everyone on the boat works or stays below, out of the way. Second, I'm in charge. The deck of a sailboat can be a dangerous place. Yesterday I already had one go overboard."

"A maiden?"

"No." Doug chuckles, twisting the wolf bracelet at his wrist. "Though two of your maidens dove in after him. Not sure we would have got him back before involving Ungainly authorities without them. He hit his head on the railing as he went over and fell into the ocean unconscious."

"Oh no!" says Serena. "Is he okay?"

Doug squeezes past her to help secure the sails. "He's resting below now. One of your healers looked at him but there wasn't much she could do."

Hope blooms in Serena’s chest. Maybe she will sail with Kai today after all. Taking a step closer to Doug, Serena lowers her voice. "So relations between the Undine and the werewolves—they are improving here?"

Doug looks at her with wide eyes, then starts laughing. They are great guffaws that eventually turn into a coughing fit.

The rest of the crew members look at Serena and Doug, and her face feels hot with embarrassment.

Once he calms himself, Doug smiles at Serena. "As I said, he was unconscious when he went overboard. Didn't open his eyes until he was being manhandled back onto the boat by the maidens. He lashed out, thinking they were attacking him. They didn't take too kindly to that."

"No, I suppose they wouldn't." Serena frowns.

"Anyway, you'd think the rest o' the pack members would be grateful, but I think they resent the fact they couldn't help their own brother and had to leave him to be rescued by maidens. So after that I had to keep them all divided as best I could."

Serena sighs, glancing at the center console where Kai is. He has just untied the last rope mooring the boat to the dock and jumps aboard. Serena will not be joining him today, she has work to do.

"Heads up!"

Serena jumps at the command, then ducks just in time for a large wooden pole to swing over her head.

"Back to the rules," says Doug. "If you are on deck, stay forward of the cockpit unless I give orders otherwise. Sometimes I'll need everyone to move their weight around to keep the boat from heeling."

"It will be as you say." Serena nods.

Doug looks at her from under bushy eyebrows. "No formality. Hand me that rope."

"Right," Serena says, retrieving one end of a tightly coiled line and passing it to Doug.

"There are certain danger areas, as you have already seen," Doug continues. "You need to watch out for the boom when it swings across the deck. Also be aware of the riggin', the boom vang, and the mainsheet. Try to stay away from the jib and the jib sheets." Doug points as he talks, but it does nothing to help Serena with the sailing terminology.

"The deck can be slippery," says Doug. "Be careful. And if you go to the bow or the stern, hold on tight. The bouncing is exaggerated at the ends."

"And my maidens were able to stay out of the way in all this?" Serena asks.

"We had a few minor mishaps at first." Doug pauses. "But they are quick learners. It was my own pack I had more trouble with. They kept urgin' the maidens out of the way to do everything themselves. But it

really takes all hands on deck to run this thing. Finally I sent all my wolves below deck so the maidens had a chance to run operations. Like I said, they are quick learners."

The back of her spine tingles, and Serena is becoming aware of the sideways glances the wolves give her. They aren't malicious, but they aren't exactly friendly. If it's not one group being stubborn bullies, it's the other.

There are shouts of excitement across the pier as the first boats pull away.

"Hold fast!" shouts Doug. "We're the last group to leave."

All five of their boats will be hovering behind the other racers so they can retrieve the Undine waiting on Hecate Island without anyone seeing. As the crowd on the pier disperses, Serena can observe each of their four other boats. On the tug, the wolves are still to one side while the maidens stand at another, but the line of division is no longer defined. It is blurred as some maidens dare to stand closer to the wolves and vice versa. Colin and Darcy's boys dart out in and out of each group, moved along by playful nudges. There are even a few interspecies conversations and food and goods trading hands.

The change in attitude gives her hope, and she turns to seek out the grumpiest pack mate on the sailboat. "Can I help you with that?"

He glares up at her, then spits onto the deck. "I don’t need no help from a freakin' mermaid."

Serena was definitely successful in choosing the right wolf. If she can turn him, she can turn anyone.

"Your mother was a mermaid," she says, crossing her arms.

The man jumps to his feet. "What did you say about my—" he cuts himself short as his eyebrows arch with realization.

Not wanting to give him a chance to respond, Serena bends to resume his work. She finishes coiling the rope and looks up at him. "The lines are good, but a figure-eight knot is better on the free end so the rope can't be pulled through the mast."

"Right," mumbles the wolf.

"What did you say?" Serena stands, looking him in the eye.

It takes him by surprise, and he stumbles over his words. "I said you are… right."

"Good!" Serena smiles. "I'm here to help. We all are."

Serena moves across the deck, pulling another pack member down just as the boom swings overhead.

"Like I said—quick learners," she hears Doug say.

* * *

"Maidens in the water!"

The shout causes the crew to scramble into action. The fleet of five ships has remained toward the rear, and now they all approach the northern end of Hecate Island. Already pack members are pulling out ropes and throwing them over anything up top that will hold.

Serena runs to the port side, eyes scanning for colored scales just below the surface of the water. She can spot sporadic bubbles popping up, a sign of her maidens, but they don’t show themselves.

Frowning, Serena turns around.

"We ain't got all day," says Doug from the cockpit in the center of the sailboat.

"Look." Serena points to the starboard side.

Directly beside them, an Ungainly trawler is keeping pace. If any Undine were to board now, humans would see. In fact, one of them waves as Doug pops his head out of the cockpit to look.

"We need a distraction," says Serena.

"Your boyfriend is comin' to help." Doug points out the center console boat that is quickly making its way to the other side of the Ungainly trawler. Serena spots two of her more subtly-shaded maidens on deck with Kai, their scales fashioned to look like bathing suits. Skimpy bathing suits.

Almost immediately the men on the Ungainly trawler cross the deck to exchange friendly racing gestures and shouts to Kai and his crew.

"Should we risk it now?" asks Doug.

Serena shakes her head. "It still isn't enough. They could look over at any time." Eyes scanning the resources on board, she cannot come up with a solution—until she spots the white canvas wrapped in three tight bundles. "This is a sailboat," says Serena.

Doug looks at her. "You’re just now realizing' that?"

"Doug." Serena looks at him, fingers jittering with excitement. "This is a *sail* boat."

"Ooooh." Doug winks at her. "Now I'm trackin'. Come here and steer for a minute."

"Me?" asks Serena.

"Yes, genius, you." He climbs out of the cockpit leaving the wheel to spin on its own.

The boat lurches toward the island and Serena scurries to grabs hold of the wheel, steadying it.

Already, Doug has begun shouting orders. "Hoist the sails!"

The crew scrambles into action. Hands pull down on thick ropes and crisp, white sails rise into the air. The mainsail flaps violently in the wind, sounding like a series of gunshots. Next go up the two smaller sails on either side.

"Serena!" shouts Doug. "Turn the wheel to nine o’clock."

Blank-faced, Serena looks at the wood-carved wheel under her hands, then back at Doug. "We don't have clocks."

He rolls his eyes. "What about degrees—do you have those?"

"Yes," Serena mumbles under her breath.

"Forty-five o' them, then."

Grasping the wheel so hard her knuckles turn white, Serena rotates it to the left. The ship responds and they veer away from the Ungainly trawler.

"Trim the jib sheets!" Doug's voice bellows above the wind.

Pack members pull on each of the smaller sails until canvas ceases flapping and instead curves gently away from the wind.

"Trim the main!" Doug shouts.

Catching on to the jargon, Serena's eyes dart to the middle sail. It takes almost all hands on deck to push the boom into position.

By now, the pack members are sweating—their brows furrowed with concentration. A hard wind pounds at the boat.

"Stay the course!" Doug tells Serena.

Her hands are still gripping the wheel. She swears she can already feel blisters forming.

One final push on the boom, and the main sail goes taut.

"Ease off!"

The crew releases pressure, allowing the boom to come back inch by inch.

"Hold!"

The main sail calms, matching the subtle curve of its smaller counterparts. The crew continues to work, tying off lines and securing the deck. Their cheeks are red and chapped by the cold wind, but that doesn't keep the smile from their faces. Sailing is gratifying work.

A small square of blue flapping in the sky, dwarfed by giant white sails, catches Serena's eyes. The signal reminds her the maidens are still in the water waiting for the all clear. She motions for Doug to take the wheel again and climbs out of the cockpit. A quick glance at the Ungainly trawler shows they are still occupied with Kai and the maidens on the center console. Quickly, Serena runs to the rails. The maidens below sense activity. They are veering closer to the surface though they are still hesitant to poke their heads above water.

Serena takes a deep breath of the chilly arctic air, then lets it out in a slow whistle. Movement underneath the water grows agitated. The sharp edge of a tail fin slices into the air but disappears again. Pushing out more sound, Serena sings the call to Assembly. Responding to the familiar tune, maidens streamline toward the boat, their colors sleek rainbow streaks under the water.

Looking to her side, she finds pack members on the sailboat lined up along the railing, staring at the spectacle.

"Maiden overboard!" she barks at them. She knows they too will respond to a familiar, or familiar-ish call, and they do. All except one spotter jumps away from the rails, taking up position at various ropes. Loose ends are tossed into the water, and a similar operation to what occurred on the tugboat, albeit to a larger scale, is performed. When a line goes rigid, crew members pull. Shortly after, the ocean delivers a yellow-scaled maiden, the color of warm afternoon light. Arching up until she is just a silhouette against the glowing medallion behind her, she begins her descent. Fins transform into legs and she lands as softly as a sun drop onto the deck of the sailboat.

"Hold!" a spotter at starboard yells to Serena.

Serena stops singing, and no more maidens emerge from the water. One of the Ungainlies is looking toward the sailboat.

A commotion on the other side of the Ungainly vessel attracts attention. The captain on Kai's cruiser is spinning in tight, fast circles, showing off.

Whoops and hollers rise up from the humans and the curious watcher turns back around.

Serena begins singing again, her tune faster and more urgent. Maidens emerge from the water, sometimes two to a rope. Downwind, even more are boarding the tug. The ship is at least far enough away so the action isn't exactly discernable.

At the helm, Doug counts maidens as they land on the deck. "That’s everyone for us," he says. "Run up the all clear."

Before his own crew can respond, one of the Undine pull a green flag from the storage bin, clips it to a rope, and runs it up the line. The pack member standing closest glares at her with idle hands.

Serena sighs. *This is going to take some work.*

Chapter Thirty

Waiting until all five ships are flying their green flags, crews turn to their tasks of navigating the racecourse while the majority of the maidens and about half of the pack members move below deck. Recalling the maps in her head, Serena mentally sails through the route ahead of them. Today will be full of passages twisting and turning through a labyrinth of hundreds of islands, and the maneuvering has already begun. Serena remembers to duck as the boom sweeps above her head while they adjust course to skirt the first island. Like trying to swim through a swarm of jellyfish, captains must work to avoid the dangerous sting of running their ships aground.

Leaving Doug to concentrate on his task, Serena finds a safe spot out of the way and turns her attention to the terrain of western British Columbia. Pine trees crowd rocky shores, covering gently rolling hills and, further back, taller mountains. The forest green is a stark contrast to the dark-blue water lapping at the islands.

"The Inside Passage," says someone behind Serena. "Where ice-covered mountains rise straight out of the water and salmon practically leap onto the decks."

Serena narrows her eyes on the intruder. "Is that some kind of euphemism for my maidens?"

"No. I read about this area in a magazine." He sits down next to her, and her breath catches as she recognizes Xavier. Heart pounding, her hand automatically goes to her stomach.

His eyes flicker to the movement, and the small smile on his face tells her he knows he has made her nervous. Leaning back, he puts his hands behind his head and closes his eyes. He has less facial hair than most of the other pack members, and his cheeks and chin have soft curves. There are no sharp angles about this one, at least not physically. "The sun feels good," he murmurs.

Serena's skin begins to tingle, as if him mentioning it makes the sun even hotter. "Not nearly as good as the moon," she responds, tugging on her hood to keep her face in the shade.

An unexpected gust of wind picks up. The crew responds, a combination of Doug's orders and their own instincts. In short order they have adjusted the sails to work with the new conditions.

"They're good," says Serena.

"*They* know what they're doing." His emphasis doesn't go unnoticed.

Serena glances at him sideways. "I hear things didn't go so well yesterday."

"You here to make peace?"

Serena shrugs. "For those who are willing."

He snorts. "We had peace back at the trailer park."

"Knock it off, Xavier," Doug warns from the cockpit.

Serena hadn't realized he was paying attention to the conversation. As she looks around, all of the wolves are throwing weary, sideways glances —but not at her.

"Your trailer park was being shut down," Serena says, dismissing his comment. "All we can do now is look ahead." Serena gazes past the pointed end of the bow cutting through pristine water. The tangled, meandering river bends around a myriad of islands teeming with wildlife. Beyond them, snow-frosted mountains stretch to infinity. "Besides," she says. "You can't tell me you prefer the view of a bunch of rickety trailers to this."

But he isn't looking at the scenery. His eyes are closed. "I prefer the way it used to be. Fish in the sea, wolves in the woods."

"Are you going to try to force us back to that?" asks Serena, her tone void of former kindness.

"Nah. Don’t have to." He settles back into his spot. "Things will fall apart on their own."

"You sound very sure of yourself." The cool and peaceful ambiance of the scenery dissipates as Serena's cheeks heat with anger.

The smile is back on his face. He takes a deep breath in, looking like he is finally enjoying The Migration. "As sure as your king is dead."

Serena lashes out with a closed fist before she can stop herself. In the next instant, Xavier is face down on the ground, and Serena is standing over him shouting, "The king was my father, and the orange-scaled maiden on the beach you killed was my friend!"

Xavier picks himself up from the deck, rubbing his jaw. A trickle of blood creeps from his lower lip. Touching it gingerly with his finger, he

glares at Serena. "Give me an excuse, mermaid. I've been waitin' for this all week."

Behind her, the rest of the crew has gone silent. Even the wind gives momentary pause, and the sails go limp above them.

Talking herself down, Serena relaxes her shoulders. *This is not the proper way to rule*.

"If it's any consolation," says Xavier. "Your father didn't taste nearly so good as the maiden."

To hell with propriety.

Serena curls her fist again, this time calling forth hardened scales overlapping her knuckles. She rears her elbow back and swings, twisting her body to gain momentum. Her arm jars as she makes contact, raking three long scratches across his face from her scaled knuckles. The wolf flies back into the railing, almost going overboard. Xavier's palm goes to his cheek, and he spits blood. "Even the high and mighty queen has claws of her own," he growls. But his voice is unnaturally deep. He has begun to change, and Serena realizes she played right into what he wanted.

"Stand down before you make things worse for yourself, Xavier," Doug moves to stand next to Serena.

Xavier doubles over until he is on the deck on all fours. His clothes rip as his body transforms underneath, tufts of spiky brown hair pushing through his skin. He looks up at Doug with red eyes. "Things can't get much worse than this," he says. He throws his head back, howling as bones in his face break apart to form a long snout.

Serena steps back, glancing around for something with which to fight. Suddenly she wishes she hadn't locked up her trident.

"How is he changing?" she asks Doug. "It isn't a full moon. Are they still somehow taking Liam's blood?"

Doug pulls her back, putting himself in between the wolf and Serena. "Liam hasn't given blood since you killed Alaric."

"Can you change too?" asks Serena. Doug's wolf might have a better chance against Xavier.

Doug shakes his head, and Serena can see the muscles in his arms tighten with tension.

Glancing around with frantic eyes, Serena needs to find something that can help her. The other pack members have already circled the

transforming wolf, but there is no telling how well they can keep him contained.

In fighting werewolves before, Serena always had her trident or her bow and arrows.

Stop moaning about the things you don't have and concentrate on what you do have, she thinks.

Serena looks up at the tall masts but almost immediately rules them out. If she climbs them and the wolf goes after her, he could put the ship out of commission only halfway through The Migration.

Backing up, her eyes are pinned to the werewolf inside the circle of pack members. He is fully transformed and already fighting his brothers, several who have armed themselves with various blunt instruments—one even has an axe. The fact that they are kin means nothing to Xavier, and the feeling seems to be mutual.

Several pack members are already battered and bloody. Doug is on the ground, clutching his leg that is bent at an awkward angle.

Glancing out at the ocean behind her, Serena knows she can always take up safety in her own element. But she has maidens below deck she can't leave behind in the wake of a rampaging werewolf. Two heads poke out of the hatch leading below deck, but they are quickly forced back under as a flailing body is thrown their way.

Xavier's wolf has made it out of the circle. Pack members left standing give chase, but the wolf is too fast. Sharp talons stretched out in front of him, he swipes at the jib sail rope, and the canvas falls, folding over one half of the deck and trapping the remaining pack members.

Now only Serena and the werewolf are left. He stares at her, chest heaving. But determined eyes tell her he has plenty of fight left.

Serena swallows hard, her own heart pounding. The pair side step, circling each other. Toes hitting something hard, Serena glances down to find the axe, flung aside during the fight. She bends to pick it up, and the werewolf leaps while she is still in a precarious crouch.

Rolling onto her back, Serena grips the axe handle at either end, holding it like a shield in front of her. As the wolf comes down on top of her, Serena thrusts out with the axe and her legs. Both hit the wolf’s soft underside, and she parry's him over.

The wolf lands hard on his feet. He slips, skittering across the wet deck before slamming into a mast.

Aware of the precious few moments she has, Serena runs toward the main sail with the axe. Quickly, she slices through the rope that prevents the boom from swinging across the deck. On her feet now, she faces the werewolf. Saliva dripping from in between yellowed teeth, he coils back on his haunches, then leaps. Claws extended and mouth wide open, he locks his red eyes on his target.

Serena glances to the cockpit where Doug is dragging himself. She nods to him. He pulls himself the rest of the way in, reaches up, and spins the wheel to the right.

The boat lurches with movement, and the wind catches the sail from a different angle. A low whistle of a large mass moving quickly behind her alerts Serena to duck. The boom comes swinging across the deck. Flying over Serena’s head, the massive cylindrical piece of wood catches the werewolf at the chest. He flies back with it and into the water.

The entire crew, now free of the jib, runs to the rails. The boat tilts with the weight change, and they all hover above the werewolf frantically splashing in the water.

Cheers rise up from the crew. Serena steps back from the railing, breathing hard and shaking hard from the fight. Maidens emerge from below deck at the commotion. They glide cautiously through the wolves toward their queen and the railing. Small smiles light their faces as they look at Serena, deducing what happened.

She licks her lips, trying to gain her composure.

The wolf is barely keeping his head above water, and he can't spare the energy to take his human form.

"Aren't you going to pull him in?" Serena asks.

No one makes a move toward the ropes.

"Nothin' but trouble, that one," says Doug, leaning with one elbow on the rail, glancing in the water. The sailboat continues to move forward and soon will leave him behind. He is already out of reach of any rope they can throw. "Maybe we ought to let another boat pick him up. If he survives that long…"

"Or if he doesn't," another pack member pipes up to the response of more laughter.

Two maidens step forward, looking at their queen. They will offer their help but only if she allows it. Grim faced, Serena nods. Like it or not, even

the big and bad wolves are her subjects, and she intends to see them all to safety.

The maidens step up onto the railing, closer to the stern, and dive in. Serena tracks their colors with her eyes, one bright yellow and one bright red. They crisscross paths back forth, enjoying their time in the water before they reach the wolf. Their colors blend, and for a moment, all Serena can see is orange scales. Sasha is with her again, lending strength from the afterlife and giving her own blessing that her murderer's life is spared.

The maidens stop in front of the wolf, but he is too far gone to notice. They disappear and a second later, so does the wolf.

Several moments go by without any sign of all three of them.

"They drownin' him?" Doug asks, his tone indifferent.

"Not today." Serena smiles. She scans the surface of the water, then points. "There."

A blur of colors underwater is racing toward the top. As the Undine emerge, they each have their hands on either side of the wolf. Thrusting out in unison, they throw him toward the boat. His limp body slams into the side railing, and several pack members have to sink their fingers into his wet fur, latching on, and pulling him over the rest of the way.

He sprawls out in a sopping mess, unconscious but breathing.

"Bring him below," says Doug. "Put him in restraints."

It takes more than one pack member to heave him along the deck, and they shoot surprised but impressed glances to the maidens in the water who were able to throw him.

Ropes are finally tossed into the water, and the maidens are helped onboard. As the crew begins to clean up from the fight, Serena surveys the damage to all of her people. Doug has definitely broken his leg. Plus, there are probably several stitches needed just judging by the various gashes on faces, arms, and hands.

"Run up the healer flag," Serena tells a maiden. She looks back at the wheelhouse. "Doug—for Poseidon's sake, let someone else do that and rest until we can get your leg looked at."

Frowning, Doug relinquishes control of the wheel to another. The red healer flag is run up the line, and the boat slows to allow the tug to catch up with them.

"You are well?" Serena asks the yellow maiden that is still dripping with saltwater.

"Yes, your majesty." The maiden nods.

The pair steps aside to make room for those hauling the jib sail back into place. Maidens and werewolves alike are working side by side to accomplish the task.

"In less than a day you completely turned around the atmosphere on the ship," the maiden says with awe. "Look at everyone. They are actually talking to each other. And *liking* it."

"I picked a fight with the right wolf," says Serena, keeping her voice low. "I may not be so lucky next time."

"Hey, sundrop," Doug calls out. "You want to pilot for a while?"

Eyes going wide with delighted anticipation, a smile breaks across the maiden's face. "Aye, aye, sir," she says, bounding to cockpit.

The pack members make way, and Doug is able to put every pair of hands, whether claws or scales hide underneath, to good use on the sailboat. Only one sopping wet werewolf sits below deck.

Thank you, Serena mouths to Doug as she takes up a rope of her own.

He responds with a salute.

Chapter Thirty-One

The rest of the day consists of a string of long, thin fiords that cut through the high peaks of British Columbia's west-coast mountains, paralleling the Pacific Ocean. Due to several narrow passages, Doug decides to order the sails taken down, and the crew uses pure motor power, relying on GPS and other instruments to get through without running aground. Everyone is tense, but at least those with injuries have something else to focus on besides their pain.

Because they have had to slow their speed by half, some of the other ships have caught up to the sailboat. When the center console pulls up alongside them, Kai is standing at the railing, surveying the damage and the injured.

His questioning eyes shoot to Serena.

"All is well, Kai Forest," she assures him, talking loud enough so her voice will cross the short distance over the sea to the next boat.

"As you say, your majesty." He bows. "Until tonight."

Nodding her consent, Serena knows he will not let another night pass without being with her. Judging from the dark circles under his eyes, he has not been sleeping well, and a night together would benefit him most of all.

She opens her mouth to say something else, but the center console speeds up to make way for the tug just arriving. Both boats cut their engines, and crews exchange ropes, binding the ships together. A plank slides across from rail to rail, and all three Undine healers cross over. Darcy is delayed as her boys insist on crossing the 'pirate's plank' with her.

"Not now," she tells them. "Maybe you can ride the sailboat tomorrow, but if you keep asking the answer is going to be no."

Colin intervenes, carting their three sullen boys away.

Darcy finally crosses, and Serena reaches up to help her down. "Doug needs you," she says.

The Undine healers focus on superficial wounds. Serena can't recall the last time a maiden, or a guard, had broken bones in their leg.

Setting her bag next to Doug, Darcy takes stock of her patient. "Is sailing your own boat too dangerous for you?" she asks him.

He grunts as she gingerly prods the knee above the break. "No, but keepin' these wolves in line might be."

"It was a wolf?" She looks up at Serena, eyebrows raised.

"Xavier," Serena says.

Darcy shakes her head. "One of Alaric's favorites." She pauses suddenly. "He must've transformed. But how?"

Both Doug and Serena shrug.

"No matter," says Darcy. "I will examine him later. But first, we need to set this bone."

Serena looks at what she has been trying to avoid all day. Sharp white bone protrudes from the side of Doug’s calf.

"It is a clean break," murmurs Darcy. "No major blood vessels damaged. Serena, grab him at the shoulders and hold him steady."

Repositioning herself, Serena gives Doug an apologetic smile, then reaches just under his arm, trying to keep her jittery fingers under control. A pack member sidles in next to her to help, and Serena is grateful for the solid shoulder touching hers.

Darcy settles herself at Doug's feet, sliding the palms of her hands under the heel of his foot. "This is going to hurt," she tells him. "But if you move your leg after I pull it into place, it might pop right back out, and we'll have to do it all over again."

Doug's face turns pale, but he nods, lips pulled back in a grimace.

Her hands tighten around his foot. "Okay here we go. Hold him steady up top."

Both Serena and the pack member squeeze Doug's shoulders.

"On the count of three. One… two—" Darcy yanks suddenly.

Doug throws his head back, howling in pain. Eyes wild, he sits up, glaring at Darcy. "Learn to count, woman!"

Ignoring her patient, Darcy is already fashioning a splint.

Serena looks down at Doug's leg. The bone has disappeared back under the skin leaving only a trickle of blood behind, like her scales. She smiles and pats Doug on the chest. "Now you know what is like to be Undine.”

Darcy gives Serena a small smile.

"Thank you," Serena says as she stands up. "I'm going to see if anyone else needs help."

Behind her, Doug is still grumbling. "One, two, *three*. Three comes right after two. It ain't that hard."

Spotting Simone's red scales easily across the deck, Serena knows Ungainly crews might do the same. She glances at the pack members assigned to keep watch. The sailboat hovers in a protected area just before a large sound and so far, no ships but their own fleet are nearby.

"Any luck finding the hydrocoral?" Serena asks Simone.

"No, your majesty," Simone is collecting leftover gauze and dressings to store back in her dry bag. "You?"

Serena looks at the hatch leading below, hoping Xavier is well restrained. "I didn't even have a chance to ask him about the empty ginger vial before things got… hairy."

"The guards aboard the tug are insisting you return with us." Simone motions to the boat idling right next to them.

Not having realized it before, Serena notices she is being watched by three of the large Undine guards, who look ready to bound over at any moment. "It might be for the best," says Serena. "I don't want to incite any more fights should Xavier awake. Tell your healers to finish quickly. We want to be underway before any Ungainly ships spot us."

Serena steps up to the railing to cross the plank. The ships move up and down with small waves, and it is enough to cause her to stop to catch her balance halfway through.

"Look!" comes a shout from the sailboat. "Movement in the water!"

All eyes glance to the caller, then follow his point out to sea. A large surface area bubbles up slightly, then goes back down. It is far too much displacement to be Undine in the water.

For a moment, Serena thinks it might be an oil slick, like she heard the Ungainlies talking about. Then another bubble surfaces directly next to the ship, and a huge humpback whale noses up out of the water. Those near the railing give shouts of delighted surprise—backing up then coming forward to catch another glimpse of the majestic beast.

The nose disappears and a rounded back curves the surface, spraying water from its blow hole in greeting. More are spotted further out. Their broad heads are dark grey with bump-like knobs. Flippers span further than the width of the tugboat, and the giant tail always gives a final flap before the entire whale vanishes underwater.

Serena jumps into the tugboat just as the closest whale begins to sing. Only snatches of the tune can be heard above water, but everyone on board

listens closely. In a way, the series of notes and clicks are not unlike the ones the Undine use in The Deep.

"Teaching them females some of your songs?" Doug shouts at her from the sailboat, his bad leg elevated on a stool for rest.

Beside him, Darcy tells her patient to hush but she has a smile on her face.

"Actually." Conner leans over the tug railing next to Serena for a better look. "It is the males that sing. They are complicated songs that can go on for an hour or more, then they will repeat it."

"Why?" asks Serena.

"Probably various reasons. Mating calls, most likely."

"Ew," says Robbie. All three of Darcy's boys have joined to watch the whales.

"What do you think they are chattin' about?" Conner asks the boy.

Robbie looks thoughtfully out to the water. "They're hungry. That one is tellin' all the rest where the fish are."

"No, look." Aiden points. "Those two are about to fight. He's singing to tell the others to back off."

"That's stupid."

"You're stupid."

"Knock it off you two." Darcy crosses over to the tug. "Or I'll make you both sing—right now—in front of everyone."

They boys wander off separately to avoid any such embarrassing punishment, leaving Serena and the pack member to watch the pod of whales in peace. The tones of the song have gone deeper.

"Maybe it is a warning," suggest Serena.

"Warning for what?" asks Conner.

Taking a step forward to lean against the rail herself, Serena scans the open water in the sound, from the lazy fins of the humpback whale, over pristine, smooth water, and straight to three large fishing boats.

"Those." Serena points.

Fishing nets hang halfway into the passage all the way from the shore, and behind those, where the sound opens up further, there are dozens more boats. Orange floaters mark submerged nets raking the bottom of the ocean. The salmon have no chance of escape, and it would be a miracle if the whales made it.

The last of the healers make their way back onto the tug, and the plank and ropes connecting the two boats are taken down. Each pilot issues orders as they prepare to navigate the labyrinth of nets.

Maidens and pack members disappear below deck as their fleet move into the line of sight of the Ungainly boats. Just as the tug begins winding through the maze, booming claps thunder across the sound. A group of humpbacks closer to the shore have found themselves boxed in and are unable to move forward.

Squinting in the direction of the commotion, Serena quickly walks to the other side of the tug shielded from prying Ungainly eyes. "Aiden?"

Darcy's oldest has found a quiet corner by himself to play cards. He looks up at Serena.

"Do you mind holding this for me?" She unties her dry bag from her waist and hands it to him. "It carries one of Societies most valued treasures."

"Your crown?" Aiden looks at the bag, confused.

"No—the Undine Ancestral Book."

He glances at her as if he can just the value of the book just by the expression on her face, then back at the bag. "Okay. I'll watch it for you. Where are you going?"

Serena steps onto the trailing and winks at Aiden. "I'm going to go sing."

Chapter Thirty-Two

She jumps off the ship, piking her body then stretching out for the dive. Icy cold envelops her body. The shock of the temperature difference between here and the water at home causes her gills to contract. Sputtering, she hovers just below the surface as she works to force them open. At the same time, scales lengthen melding her legs together. Her second skin has become lazy from the lack of use, and the sharp edges poking their way through is more painful than she remembers.

It has been only a few days since she has last had her fins, but she is out of practice. Sputtering and dog-paddling underneath the hull of the boat, this is her clumsiest transformation in years. Once she is full Undine, and recovered from it, Serena swims to the other side of the ship.

The clear blue waters of the sound are teeming with life. It is spawning season, and schools of pink salmon are buzzing with activity, preparing for their journey up river to their own birthing grounds.

Serena starts forward, schools of fish darting out of her way as she swims. Bobbing orange at the surface catches her eye, and Serena remembers what it signals just in time. She darts out of the way as a frayed net swoops past her, scooping up fish she scared into its path. The bottom of the net is rigged with heavy rubber wheels that crawl over the rocky bottom. Frowning at the noise and destruction the net creates, not to mention the sheer amount of life it is destroying, Serena reaches for the knife strapped at her waist. She changes direction and follows the net up to where the web of lines converge into one thick rope.

Wrapping her tail around to steady herself, she begins sawing through the cord. The knife is dull, and she has to push hard to make any headway with it. Arm tiring, Serena pauses to work out a cramp forming in her shoulder. Above the surface, a loud motor whirs to life and the entire network of rope jerks up with Serena still attached to it. Panicked, she pulls away but her tail is caught as the net tightens. The motors above speed up, and the water turns lighter the closer Serena is pulled to the surface. She turns back to sawing at the rope, this time to save herself as much as the fish.

The cramp in her shoulder starts up again, but she ignores the pain and keeps pushing the knife back and forth into the rope. She swears if she were on an Ungainly beach she'd be doing that sweating thing.

The rope just above her head breaches the surface.

By the grace of Poseidon! Serena screams in her head, heart pounding and vision going blurry with panic.

One last push through, and the rope snaps. The entire net floats to the ground, and the salmon inside scatter, several confused fish bumping into Serena as they flee. Serena turns her attention to the rope and is able to untangle her tail.

As her pulse settles, Serena gives weary glances to any other ropes, leaving the fish trapped inside to their fate. Toward the far end of the sound, Serena spots the agitated whales. She watches them as she straps her knife back around her waist.

Boxed in on three sides, the whales barely have room to turn around. Even if they could, maneuvering their large bodies through the maze of nets would be impossible unless they knew the exact path to take.

Humming a low, slow tune, Serena keeps it quiet enough so only the whales in front of her will catch it, working to copy the tone quality of the whale song she heard earlier without mimicking it exactly. She wants to entice them to follow her—not warn them away.

Emphasizing her case with whistles and clicks, Serena works to reason with them. Moving into a higher frequency, Serena's call grows louder as she adds vibration to her song. Slowly, they begin to turn toward her.

Serena backs up as she swims, making room for the mammoths of the sea. Only one of them lingers, staying away from Serena. As the large body alternately sinks and rises, Serena spots a small calf behind it. The mother needs further convincing that Serena isn't a danger to her calf.

Serena ends her song and doesn't repeat it as supposedly the whales do. Instead, Serena pulls out her knife. She swims over to the closest netting and begins to cut it. Mindful of keeping her tail well clear of the entanglements, she works her way patiently through the rope.

Whales are intelligent creatures, and Serena doesn't doubt the mother is watching her actions. Finally, the rope breaks apart, widening the path out.

Following the same trail the other whales took, Serena moves to the next rope. The lead male begins his song. It is just as complicated a tune as before, but this time Serena recognizes one of her signature whistles

within the layers of harmony. She pauses her work briefly and smiles. He has taken part of her song to let the other whales know he has found the way out.

Just as Serena cuts through the rope, she jumps back at a large mass beside her. It is the mother whale, grey body gliding through the water past the fishing nets. Swimming on the other side, the calf peers at Serena over his mother's back. He slows, giving Serena three quick whistles, then hurries to catch up to his retreating mother.

There is a series of shouts above the surface—the fisherman are agitated because of their damaged nets. Serena moves along, looking back with satisfaction at her trail of destruction. Keeping a respectful distance, Serena follows the mother and calf until she reaches the tugboat.

Before she can even surface on the private side of the boat, a rope hits the water. Serena reaches up, grasping the frayed ends. She manages to transform into legs before she is hoisted out of the water. Flying through air then landing hard on the deck, her feet ring with the sudden stop. She nods to the pack mates who pulled her aboard.

"You helped the whales, didn't you?" asks Aiden.

Serena turns to find him holding her dry bag in one hand and his playing cards in the other. "Yes," she says. She wipes excess saltwater from her skin and scales then repositions the knife at her waist.

Aiden hands her the dry bag, eyebrows furrowed. "Just by singing to them?"

"Well—"

"I could never do that.” He doesn’t wait for her answer. “I can't sing."

"It wasn't just about the singing," says Serena. "It was about showing trust and making friends." She ties the dry bag off in a strong knot at her hip. "And I know you can do that."

"You do?"

"You already have." Serena pats her dry bag and smiles down at the boy. He stands up, and she has to step back to look up at him.

He is getting tall quick.

"Do you know how to play poker?" he asks.

"No," says Serena. She glances around the deck. Everyone above is fairly occupied, there are no emergencies or problems. It seems the wolves and maidens are still getting along. Up at the front, Kiera and the seasick-prone pack mate are talking, their shoulders touching as they look out over

the railing. Serena's eyes drift back to Aiden, falling on the needle marks marring his otherwise smooth skin along the inside of his arm. There is no doubt he is taking Liam's blood, but his parents have been unable to get him to tell the truth about who is giving it to him.

Serena sits down, motioning Aiden to do the same. "Maybe you can teach me."

"Okay." He smiles and hops down beside her, exhibiting a boyish excitement he has just about outgrown, or convinced himself he has. He deals seven cards each. "All my brothers ever want to play is Go Fish or Old Maid."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?" Serena looks at Aiden.

His eyes go wide. "No… I—its Old *Maid*, not Old Maiden."

"Teasing." Serena smiles.

"Oh." The boy lets out a nervous laugh. "Okay so the point of the game is to have the highest-value hand. You can do that with two, three, or four of the same card, a flush—which is five cards all of the same suit—or a straight—which is numbers of any suit in order. There is also a full house and a straight flush."

"I found this one left behind on a beach one time." Serena holds the Queen of Spades.

Pausing in his explanation, Aiden looks up. "Maybe it was some sort of sign."

"Maybe," Serena mumbles, looking at the two-faced queen, draped in red and yellow robes with a crown atop her head.

"You aren't supposed to show me your cards." Aiden gently takes the queen from her hand and slides it back in her stack. "Don't worry. I'll forget that you have it." He smiles at her.

The boyish excitement is back and Serena can't help but smile herself.

Aiden lays down a pair of sevens.

"You know you can talk to me, right?" Serena gestures to his outstretched arm.

He follows her glance, then quickly retracts his arm and puts on a jacket that was stuffed under a bench behind him.

"We are friends, right?" Serena asks.

He looks up at her from under bushy eyebrows, then shrugs.

"Anything you want to tell me stays between us. I won't tell your parents if you don't want me to."

Waiting patiently for some kind of response, Serena watches Aiden flick back the edges of the cards in his hand without focusing on them, as if he is working his way through a debate in his own head.

Finally, he lets out a breath. "I will keep that in mind, thank you." Shoulders hunching with a burden he refuses to unload, Aiden suddenly looks older than his years.

"As you say," Serena says, hiding her disappointment behind her own stack of cards fanned out in her hand. She runs her tongue over her teeth, aware of a slick, bitter film forming in her mouth.

After a few hands of poker, Aiden breaks the silence. "Are you okay?" he asks Serena.

Rubbing her temples, coaxing them through a forming headache, Serena puts down her cards. "Mind if we continue the game a little later? I think I need to rest."

Aiden blinks and nods his head. Rising after a final farewell nod to Aiden, Serena slips below deck and into one of the hammocks swinging in a darkened corner. She closes her eyes and takes stock of her body. Besides the headache and the weird bitter taste in her mouth, her skin feels flaky and dry, and her lungs are tight. She can't take a full breath without them contracting too soon. It is not painful but definitely worrisome.

Running through a list of possible causes to her ailments, Serena realizes this is how she began to feel when she was out of the water too long when spending time at the wolf camp. But now it is ten-fold, and she just did take a dip in the water.

It wasn't until after that when I started to feel sick.

Serena's eyes fly open in realization. The Undine cannot touch these waters, less they all fall ill before reaching their destination.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Serena cannot force herself up to warn others of the poisoned waters, she is too dizzy and weak. Her rest is interrupted constantly by shouts above as the crew maneuvers through treacherous passages. She vaguely recalls this was supposed to be one of the most difficult legs of the race. When she does drift off, she dreams of being caught up in an Ungainly net, just to be brought to their ship and stabbed with needles. Serena wakes up shivering.

"Serena?"

Focusing on a familiar voice, Serena drags herself from her haze and opens her eyes. Darcy's face hovers above the hammock.

"We're here," Darcy says.

"Where is here?" Serena barely manages to croak out the words.

Frowning in consternation, Darcy puts a hand to Serena's forehead. "Another island. I can't remember which—I've lost track of all their names. It’s camp for the night."

Serena glances around the large, empty room at the same time the order to disembark is given above. Panicked, she jolts up. The shift in weight causes the hammock to tilt right and Serena falls out. Darcy manages to catch her, and they both stumble across the slippery floor before gaining their balance.

"Why is everyone getting off?" asks Serena, attempting to hold her own weight. "Ungainlies will spot us!" She heads for the ladder well with Darcy close behind.

"We have the island to ourselves," Darcy says. "All five of our boats are docked here—the rest of the racers are across the channel."

Serena pauses at the bottom of the stairs, one hand resting on the railing. "Okay… that's good."

"You look dehydrated. Does that happen to mermaids?" asks Darcy.

"I've been out of the water too long," says Serena.

Darcy puts her hand on her hip. "That seems an easy fix."

"Not quite." Serena attempts a smile. "This water does not agree with us. We need to spread the word my maidens cannot enter it."

"I can do that," Darcy says. "Come on. Let's get you into the open air."

Helping Serena up the steep stairwell, Darcy begins issuing orders at the first person she sees and doesn't stop doling directions out the whole way off the boat, down the dilapidated pier, and onto land. Finally, Liam stops the hobbling pair of women.

"You alright, sis?"

"No, she is not," Darcy answers before Serena can even lift her head. "Where is Kai?"

Liam points to a tent sitting further in the tree line. It stands alone and is surrounded by thick shrubbery so no one could even consider setting up close by.

"Liam," Serena speaks up. "Can you please take care of everything? I will need to be with Kai tonight."

"Sure thing," he says. "I got this. Most everyone is finally behaving. You just get better."

"Thank you," Serena mouths over her shoulder as Darcy shoos Liam away.

Shortly after, Serena hears Liam sending scouts out to retrieve Kai and the Undine healers. Hobbling her way into the tent with Darcy's assistance, Serena pushes aside the mat that has been laid out for her. She curls up on the floor and closes her eyes.

When she opens them, it is pitch black outside, and she is next to something damp. It stirs, and Serena scoots away, now wide awake.

"You're alive."

"Kai?" Serena pushes herself upright, eyes flying open. "You didn't go swimming did you? The water will make you sick. Very sick."

The darkened form begins to take shape as Serena's eyes adjust to the low light. "That is all you, Moonshine. You were sweating out a fever for a while there."

Serena realizes she is the one that is wet. "My apologies," she mumbles, attempting to wipe some of it off. "This stuff seemed way more attractive on you."

"Here." Kai laughs, handing her a blanket that was tossed aside with all the other Ungainly sleeping paraphernalia.

Clearing her head from the fog of sleep while she takes her time wiping off with the blanket, Serena admits she feels much better after the rest. There is still a small tinge of a headache, and she is weak. Her arms drop from the exertion of using the blanket.

Kai scoots closer, taking it from her. He balls up one corner, dabbing at her temple and forehead. Up close, Serena can see detailed features of Kai's face. His eyes glisten with affection, but there are dark circles underneath. His cheeks are pulled up in a smile, but they are too gaunt. He hasn't been eating well.

Serena can't even send him into the waters for restoration. She leans into his soft touch, unexpected tears springing to her eyes.

Setting down the blanket, Kai gathers her up in his strong arms, holding her while she weeps.

"I'm sorry," stutters Serena. "I just didn't expect this to be so… hard. Maidens will get sick if they don’t go in the water, but they will get sick if they do."

Warm lips move to her ear. "We are strong, and we have the wolves by our side. We will make it. *You* are going to make it, because I will hold you together until we get there."

Serena breathes in his salty scent. No matter where they are, Kai will always smell like home. Calming herself, Serena puts her forehead against his. Warmth envelops her, and she looks up. The canopy covering the mesh ceiling vent is gone, leaving an unobstructed view of the night sky. Moonlight filters in, bathing the couple in its warmth.

"See," says Kai. "There are other ways to heal."

Serena looks into his sea-green eyes, rimmed by dark lashes. Golden-brown specks flare bright under the rays of the moon. "I've missed you," says Serena.

"I'm here now." Kai's palm moves to Serena's hip.

She flushes under the heat of his gaze.

"Feel better?" he asks.

"I'm getting there," she whispers, her heart pounding in her chest.

Gently lifting her chin with the crook of his finger, Kai whispers back, "What else can I do?"

Serena meets his eyes, her lips inches from his and her entire body buzzing with anticipation. "Restore me."

Eyes flashing, Kai presses his body into hers, grazing her lips with his own. Wrapping one hand around the back of his neck, Serena sinks into hard earth, pulling Kai with her.

A needing ache forms low in her belly.

The pads of his fingers move up the outside of her thigh, working their way in. One by one, scales retract, the pain of it replaced by the heat of his hand against her bare skin.

Kai suddenly pauses, pulling away. Solid arms on either side of Serena's head hold him up. "I don't have any more protection."

Serena pushes up on her elbows, brushing her lips across his. "Just you," she answers. "I just want you."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Serena awakens in Kai's arms to watch the fog roll in. It creeps over their tent, drowning out the warm rays of the early morning moon. Kai stirs next to her.

"You awake?" she whispers.

Eyelashes flutter as he works to focus on the fog hanging above them. "Well, that is ominous," he says.

Smiling, Serena settles into the warm spot between his body and his arm.

"Do you feel… restored?" Kai kisses her on the forehead.

"Yes." She bites her lower lip, and her face goes hot with memories of the night before. "Still a bit weak, though." Moments pass before Serena speaks again. "I can't let everyone think I'm sick."

"The way Darcy had to practically carry you in yesterday is not going to debunk the rumors that are definitely flying around. Plus the healers came to see you at the height of your fever last night."

Serena moans. "Simone can't keep a secret to save her life, much less mine." Serena shifts to look up at Kai. "What about you? Sleep well?"

"Like a walrus at the bottom of a blubber pile."

Serena narrows her eyes. He is trying to be funny, but it is not going to distract her from her next question. "Any nightmares?"

Kai tenses, remaining silent.

Gently, Serena runs her fingers over his bare chest, hoping the intimate contact reassures Kai.

You can trust me with this.

"I am the Head of the Queen's Guard," he finally says. "It is not right that I can't handle the aftermath of a few battles."

Serena looks up at him. "I am a little familiar with the pressure of being a leader," she sympathizes. Her head snaps up with an idea. "If the same were happening to one of your guards, what would you tell them to do?" Serena asks.

Kai sighs. "Good point."

"Soooo…" she prods.

"So I'll talk to someone," he says.

"Do you want me to get one of the healers—?"

"No," Kai interrupts. "Give me some time to put my thoughts together. And I don't want to send my pairing mate to ask like I can't do it myself."

Serena hides her smile by snuggling deeper into his chest. "We're a mess," she murmurs.

"I know." He kneads his fingers through his hair. The bioluminescence crackles to life with the massage. "And I wouldn't exchange our mess for any other in the world."

"Me either," says Serena. "But right now we have to hide that mess under at least a little bit of regal composure. I think I hear the camp packing up."

Kai reaches for a blanket and throws it over the pair of them. "Shh," he says. "If we're really quiet maybe they'll forget about us."

"That is highly doubtful." Serena giggles, but she plays along anyway, holding down a corner of the blanket.

"Your majesty?" Evandre's voice rings through the mist from outside the tent.

Serena and Kai freeze, their eyes going wide. Serena flings back the blanket, attempting to sit up.

"No!" Kai whisper-yells. "I won't let them have you!" He pulls the blanket back over them, wrapping it tightly around Serena.

"Kai, stop," Serena says, having a hard time keeping her laughter suppressed.

A wrestling match ensues and the pair, limbs intertwined with the blanket, roll into one side of the tent, then the other. Now Serena laughs out loud, but it devolves into a coughing fit with the extra exertion. Kai sits her up, patting her on the back while she takes large gulps of fresh air.

"Your majesty?" Evandre asks again. She sounds further away, as if she took several steps back at the disturbance inside.

Serena clears her throat. "Yes?"

"The racers are preparing to launch. We need to get you on the boat."

"The queen requires further rest," Kai's voice booms out. "Inform the Ungainlies that the race is delayed until tomorrow."

"I… don't think we can do that," a hesitant answer is given.

Rolling the blanket into a tight ball, Serena throws the entire thing at Kai's face. As Kai simulates a fierce battle with a face-sucking monster,

she stands, smoothing out her hair. "Of course not," she calls out. "He was just kidding. I will be along shortly."

"As you say, your majesty," says Evandre.

Serena listens until the maiden's footsteps fade in the distance, then turns to face Kai.

He has emerged from the battle successful—his opponent laying crumpled on the floor. "Ready?" he asks.

"Ready," says Serena. "Which boat will you—?"

"Whichever boat you are on. We are together today." He takes her hand in his.

"As you say." Serena smiles. "But I'd like to remain close to the healers, so it will probably be the tug."

Serena unzips the flap and steps outside, watching Kai break down the tent while she plays with the mermaid charm hanging from her neck. She does feel better, but even the simple act of standing upright causes nausea.

This is going to take some doing to pull off, she thinks. Recalling the sailing route, she believes it should be a fairly easy day. Once Kai has the tent and blankets rolled up under one arm, she takes his other for stability, and they walk to the docks.

The fog is still thick, subduing noise and the overall mood. Everyone moves about their tasks silently, like ghosts, keeping their eyes straight ahead. Serena is at least grateful for the relative privacy as she stumbles her way to the boat.

On board the tug, the atmosphere is livelier while preparations for launch are underway. There will be no way to spot other racers due to the fog, so the fleet will have to use their best judgment when to launch. A general feeling of euphoria rises up when it is announced no one has to stay below deck to hide. Fog will obscure the presence of those above deck, and spotters placed around the railings should give plenty of warning before there are any incidents.

Serena finds a seat on a bench. Kai is up and providing help where he can without ever straying too far from her.

"Feel better?" Liam sits on the bench beside Serena. It bows with his weight, and she has to steady herself to keep from falling against him.

"This is going to be a long day if people are going to keep asking me that," she says.

Liam shrugs. "I heard the healers had a long few hours trying to bring your fever down."

"I wouldn't know," says Serena. "But no more fever, at least for now. You've issued the order that no maidens are to go into the water?"

"I don't issue orders," he says, leaning back against the railing. "But I spread the word to avoid the water if they don't want to end up like you."

"Lovely," says Serena. "The wolves should probably stay out of it as well."

"Too cold for our blood, anyway," says Liam. He closes his eyes then opens one to look at Serena. "Seriously, though. You gonna make it?"

The ends of Serena's lips turn down. "I'm weak, but I'll be okay. The sooner we get there the better."

"Did you eat breakfast?" he asks.

"A little. You? I think they are handing out food near the bow."

"I've eaten more than I can handle in one sittin'," he says, closing both eyes again.

She looks at Liam. "You are on the tug today, too? Maybe we should split up."

"I'd rather be here."

"Why?" asks Serena.

"Sophia's here. I said I'd keep an eye on her. Remember?"

A bright spot of orange amidst the fog emerges from the other side of the boat. Serena watches as Sophia searches the myriad of faces before her eyes fall on Liam. Sensing her approach, Liam suddenly straightens, smooths back his hair and clearing his throat.

"Breakfast?" Sophia offers a small basket of rolls, fruit, and sliced fish.

"I'm famished." Liam takes the basket with a wide smile.

Sophia blushes, smiling back. It isn't for several moments—until at least Liam has downed two rolls, that Sophia sees Serena. "Your apologies, my majesty! I mean, er, my apologies, your majesty." She bends in an awkward, rushed curtsey. "May I retrieve sustenance for you as well?"

"No, thanks," says Serena, glancing at Liam. "I've already eaten more than I can handle in one sitting."

Narrowing his eyes, Liam gives Serena a silent warning. *Do not ruin this for me.*

Shouts from the wheelhouse interrupt. The captain orders ropes untied and the anchor lifted.

Sophia curtseys again before facing Liam. "I'll check in with you in a bit," she says before disappearing back into the fog.

Watching his eyes follow Sophia, shoulders sagging a little when she is no longer in sight, Serena smiles at Liam. The sun has gone behind the clouds. "I think you are no longer a child of the moon," says Serena.

"What?" Liam forces down his last bite, brushing crumbs from his face.

"Nothing," says Serena. "Are you going to eat all of that?"

He shrugs. "She'd be disappointed if I didn't… "

The boat jerks, and the entire fleet pulls away from the docks. A fine mist falls from the air, and it does nothing to dissipate the fog. The five ships stick close together.

Pushing himself up, Liam offers his support for Serena to stand at the railing. Kai joins the pair and the three spend the morning scanning the low-hanging clouds for any sign of land or Ungainly boats. In the early afternoon, the wind picks up and the fog thins just in time to reveal a majestic waterfall. It cascades down the face of a mountain that springs straight out of the ocean.

Serena gasps, craning her neck back as she follows the mountain to the top. The fog lifts a bit more, this time in front of a blue-iced glacier that towers over the sailboat. A chunk of ice falls away, cracking into the ocean below causing the boat to rock from the tidal wave.

Further on, Liam points out swarms of sea otters and dolphins playing in the waters beside the ship, beckoning for its occupants to come join them.

Serena smiles and gives a rueful wave.

"Look up," says Kai.

The skies, cleared of clouds and fog, bare no shortage of wildlife. Scores of eagles soar above the boat, a few brave birds swooping close to the ship for a better look.

"They might be taking an interest in our fish," says Kai, gesturing to the barrels of cold food storage a few feet away.

"They can have them," says Serena, drawing Kai's warm arm tighter around her shoulders.

Liam scoffs. "So says the vegetarian." He stands to cover one of the open barrels with a tarp. "But I say she doesn't know what she's missin' out on." He looks at Serena; one eyebrow sits higher than the other.

"Okay." Serena gives in. "Enlighten me."

"Well, now, let's see. Other than the usual poached, smoked, broiled, roasted, baked, or seared salmon, you have your salmon spread and salmon jerky."

"Don't forget about sushi." Kai leans in, joining the conversation. "And I've seen picnickers with salmon burgers – oh, and barbeque salmon too."

Serena elbows him. "Don't take his side."

"You've got to admit it, Serena. Your boyfriend knows his salmon," taunts Liam.

"Perhaps." Serena glares at Kai. "But my *boyfriend* certainly doesn't know when to hold his tongue."

Gusts of wind move across the channel. At the front of the fleet, the sailboat is a flurry of activity as they adjust to the change in weather.

"Ahoy, there!"

All heads whip back in the other direction to the sound of the call. With the distraction of watching operations on the sailboat, no one noticed the Ungainly ship creeping up behind them.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Serena turns her back, pulling the hood over her head. She gives a few sharp clicks of her tongue. Maidens recognize the warning call, and they automatically head for the hatch leading below deck. Those too far away simply duck below the railing or make themselves scarce behind barrels, ropes, or lifeboats—anywhere they can hide.

It is too late for Serena to duck, and she would appear too suspicious if she keeps her back to the Ungainly boat, so she turns to face them alongside Kai and Liam, hoping the hood hides the sharp angles and blue tint of her cheekbones.

Everyone watches as the Ungainlies move closer. The tug captain peers out of the wheelhouse ensuring extra maidens and wolves are hidden, then slows his speed. The Ungainly boat is another sailboat, smaller than the one Doug pilots, and has six humans on board, at least that are visible.

"We thought we were the only ones making the run today," shouts one of the men. "We didn't see anyone else leaving the docks."

Liam clears his throat. "Docks were full last night when we came in. The five boats here stayed on an island across the channel instead." He glances back. "Why did the other racers stay back?"

The boats are only a few spans away from each other now.

"Because of the storm," says the Ungainly. "Supposed to be a big one. Race officials gave us the option to dock for a day until it passes. But my crew has to leave the day after the race to get home. If we wait a day, we may not be able to finish."

Liam turns to Serena and Kai. "They were talkin' about possible storms at the camp. I just didn't think they were supposed to come this far north." He raises his voice again for the humans. "When will it arrive?"

Serena glances at the line of maidens hiding from Ungainly view just under the railing.

"Late afternoon," replies the human. "We thought we could beat it, but I'm not so sure anymore," he says, gesturing to the western skies.

Serena, Liam, and Kai all turn, lifting their chins to look. The sky is now void of eagles. Solemn gray clouds silently roll in, a darker more ominous version of the fog earlier that morning.

"Ain't nothing good coming from those thunderheads," says the human. "We better get ready for some big waves. Let's stick close—and be sure to run up your emergency flag if you are in trouble."

"Will do," says Liam. "Good luck."

"Fair winds to you, too, young man."

Just as the human turns away, a strong gust blows across the deck of the tugboat, flipping Serena's hood back from her face.

Kai spins her around as she gropes with frantic fingers to replace it.

"That was close," she says.

"But we aren't out of the woods by a long shot," says Kai. "Look."

The small fleet of ships is just entering Chatham Sound. Land peels away, and the water is as vast as the Pacific Ocean herself. It would be choppy here even without the storm, but as the wind picks up the surface responds, pitching the tug from side to side.

Shouts come from the human boat, and they angle their bow straight into the headwind. The tugboat follows suit, then the sailboat. Loose items roll across the deck of the tug, and those who are in plain view of the Ungainlies jump into action to secure the boat. Maidens who remain hidden below the railing toss out ropes to Serena and Kai, who tie down food supplies, bags, and anything else that could be flung into the sea or become dangerous missiles during the storm.

Thunder cracks across the sound, reverberating Serena's bones and causing her breath to catch in her throat. It reminds Serena of her father's call. "Poseidon help us," she says out loud.

All eyes turn to the sky. Black clouds pitch and roll, turning the heavens as chaotic as the seas.

"Come on," says Liam. "Keep going."

Serena is tying off a knot securing another barrel of salmon when the skies open, blasting sheets of rain over the boats. Almost instantly drenched, fingers slippery and cold, Serena struggles with her last knot.

"Here let me." Kai bends beside her and takes each end of rope, running them through a quick dance of loops, knots, and tugs until he gives one final yank. "There."

His solid warmth beside Serena is reassuring but his shoulders are tense, and he casts nervous peeks at the skies.

Serena nudges the frayed ends of rope with the crook of her finger. "Hopelessly intertwined," she says, looking back at Kai. "Like us."

Without warning, Kai stands, lifting Serena to her feet. His arms slide around her waist, pinning her to him. Leaning in, the tip of his nose caresses her cheek until their lips find each other. The silky pink rims of his mouth contradict Kai's rigid body. Slow, cautious kisses counter the building storm around them, as if Kai is taunting Mother Nature herself.

Taking a shaky breath, Serena inhales Kai’s scent, and she knows she is home again. She sweeps the pad of her thumb across his cheekbone until her entire hand wraps around to the back of his head, tangling in his hair and pulling him closer.

Responding, Kai runs the tip of his tongue across Serena's lower lip. The feather-light touch sends electricity through Serena's body, warming her from the cold rain that no longer seems to touch her. It is his turn to take a breath, and Serena willingly gives everything she has, the loss of air a pleasant ache in her chest.

Cradling her cheek with an open palm, Kai plants one more gentle kiss on the corner of her lips before pulling away. He smiles as he meets her eyes, fingers falling to interlock with hers. "Stay close, okay?" he whispers.

"As you say." She squeezes his hand.

Thunder rolls across the sky, demanding Serena's attention. Casting an exasperated look at the heavens, she turns her back on them, resuming her work in securing the deck side by side with Kai.

Liam calls out, "If you two are done dancing around on first base, I need help with this lifeboat."

The small wooden dinghy is barely bigger than a canoe but weighs a ton. Grunting, the trio push, moving it off to the side to tie it down.

"What is first base?" Kai asks Liam as he hands him more rope.

"Oh, um." Liam ties his first knot. "It's part of a human sport—baseball."

"Never played," says Kai. He takes the rope back from Liam to tie his own knot. "But once we've made it to Ivvaavik, maybe you can teach me." Kai tugs hard on the rope to ensure it is secured, then turns to Liam, slapping him on the back. "We can dance on first base together."

Serena bites her lip to keep from laughing—she knows Kai is teasing Liam. Nonetheless, Liam's whole face grows red.

Standing, Liam runs his palm through his hair, shedding it of excess water built up by the rain. He gestures to the sailboat ahead of them. "I

should've caught a ride with them."

"Oh, come on—it can't be that bad here," says Serena. "No more kissing, I promise."

"At least just, give me some warning first." Liam keeps his eyes pinned on the sailboat.

All hands are busy on the deck of the vessel. The sails are brought down and tied securely, rigging is checked and double checked, and the wolves all don lifejackets.

"What about our lifejackets?" a passing pack member asks as he follows Serena and Liam's gaze to the sailboat.

"We needed space for food storage," says Serena. "Remember?"

"Won't do them no good, anyway," says Liam, winding more rope around his arm. "Soon as they go overboard, fear will kick in and most of them will transform. They'd rip right through the vest."

The only good swimmers are the maidens, but unless Serena wants a school of sick Undine who still have more than half their journey to endure. Hopefully, no one ends up in the water.

Lightening fissures out from the clouds above, highlighting nervous faces of maidens still hiding under the railing. Thunder follows almost immediately, breaking across the sky like a gunshot. Serena flinches as its energy rattles straight through her, shaking even the sturdy tug.

"Here it comes," shouts Liam.

No longer concerned with loose items, all occupants of the boat race to secure themselves. The brunt of the storm hits them full force, wind and rain pelting at them sideways while the ship pitches and heaves. Maidens under the railing rise without fear of being seen in order to grasp something solid. The Ungainly boat is nowhere to be found, obscured amongst the massive waves.

"Mommy!" the child's shout rings through the atmosphere better than thunder, causing Serena's heart to race.

All eyes turn to Darcy and her boys, huddled into a corner at the stern of the boat. Suddenly the stakes are brought into sharp focus, and Serena wishes they were riding out the storm on solid ground.

"We should have never left," Serena says out loud.

Beside her, Liam gives her a sharp glance. "Too late for that. We can only look ahead."

But ahead lies only terrifying nightmares. Hundreds of whitewater swells, churning rollers waiting to smash into Serena's fragile fleet in order to prove the truth of her words. They should have never left.

There is nothing she can do about it, except endure the storm. The boat keels down as it rides the backside of the wave, dipping into a deep trough. Serena's stomach drops, and she reaches out to cling to the nearest thing she can. It is the sturdy railing. She wraps her arms around it, riding the wave. She watches the front of the boat where Kiera and her seasick partner still are. They too hold on for their lives, huddled together.

Kai shields Serena, her own protective support, blocking her view of the wrathful squall surrounding them.

A loud crack echoes the thunder above and the occupants of the ship are jolted as the hull smacks against the water. Kai loosens his grasp around Serena. Peeking out from his embrace, Serena's eyes attempt to focus directly in front of the ship. Confused at what lies before them, Serena slowly stands. Instead of the churning, white water mess that it was not moments ago, the surface of the ocean is smooth and solid. Serena takes a step back, bringing the angle of the water into perspective. Lifting her chin, she realizes it does not stretch out before the ship. Instead, it is going straight up to the heavens. It is the next wave towering over them. Serena only has the time to look at Kai, mouth open to shout.

No words come. The wave washes over the ship, punching into Serena's chest and gut. Her head slams against something hard and neither her gills nor her lungs can deal with the assault. Her breath leaves her, replaced only with blackness and pain.

Time brings sweet numbness. Serena's eyes flutter behind heavy lids that feel pinned shut. Flashes of light move in the darkness. Serena calls out, her voice working better than her vision. The word she utters stuns even her. "Mother?"

Music fills her brain, responding to Serena's call. It is a sweet song, dripping of lazy bubbles rising from The Deep until they reach the moonlit surface to fall open, exposing themselves to the world. This song is meant for Serena.

"Serenita, my beautiful princess," the melodious voice chants.

"Is it my time?" Serena asks. Peace overwhelms her, and she knows if she crosses into the afterlife now, those she leaves behind will be okay.

"Not yet." The music and the singing stop. "The queen has yet to fulfill her purpose."

Light rushes into Serena, penetrating through to her bones, then pulling back out just as viscously.

Serena comes to, coughs raking at her throat as seawater trickles from the corners of her mouth and the gills behind her ears. Blinking her eyes open, Serena focuses on Simone's red lips. They are no longer full and pouty. They are pinched together with concentration, occasionally parting to release short, panicked breaths. When they round out or open further to form words, it is clipped orders. Simone's voice is the first that reaches Serena, slicing straight through the ringing in her ears. "This one is okay."

Serena finds some solace in being referred to as 'this one' instead of 'her majesty', like she is one of the group again instead of hovering on some lonely cliff above it.

"There is one more unconscious—over there."

Simone moves away. It must be quickly, because her image is blurred, half of it taking longer to leave Serena's line of sight. Almost immediately, Kai has taken Simone's place. Serena's lips quiver as she attempts a smile. She doesn't mind forcing her eyes to focus on this face.

"Is everyone okay?" Serena manages to croak out as Kai helps her to a sitting position. "No maidens in the water?"

"We think everyone is still aboard, but if the water keeps washing over us like this, it won't matter if the maidens don't enter the water. The water will enter them."

"He hates me right now," says Serena, leaning her head back against the hard bulkhead of the ship.

"Who?"

"Poseidon."

Kai grunts. "I'm not sure Poseidon could talk Mother Ocean down from her anger right now, even if his own daughters' lives depended on it." He stands as Serena does. "Maybe you should keep sitting."

Serena grasps the railing as her head sways worse than the ship. Squeezing her eyes shut, Serena waits until the wave of nausea passes, then she scans the chaos on board. She must not have been out that long. Maidens and pack members alike are still picking themselves up from where they slid across the deck.

A few of the pack members have transformed. Sopping wet wolves slowly get up on all four paws. There is not any panic on the part of the maidens—either because they are too exhausted to care, or because they know the wolves are.

As Serena's gaze follows the aftermath up to the front of the boat, she watches as Kiera picks herself up. The maiden is alone now, her frantic eyes skip around the small area.

"Did you count the werewolves?" Serena asks Kai.

"Not yet," he says.

Down the way, Liam is busy untangling one of his own from fishing nets.

"There is one missing." Serena looks back at the bow. Kiera is climbing on top of the railing, her pinkish-purple scales a sharp contrast to the black water spread out before her.

"Kiera—no!"

The storm raging around Serena dulls into background noise as she watches Kiera's feet leave the railing. They point into graceful arches, moving up as she jumps away from the bow, then down when she pikes into a dive.

Hand outstretched as if she can somehow stop Kiera, Serena's feet won't move quickly enough. Against the deafening cacophony of the raging gale, there is a whisper of a splash as the first maiden enters the water.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A different kind of cracking echoes across the water. In a daze, Serena's eyes drift from where Kiera jumped off the ship. The Ungainlies did not get their sails down in time, and now the force of the wind is causing the boat to tip. Wood on the deck splinters as the storm shows no mercy for the Ungainlies or their vessel.

All movement on the tug ceases as maidens and pack members stop to watch. A mammoth wave builds, creeping up to the Ungainly ship. Everyone can see it coming, yet are powerless to stop it. The wave folds over, plunging the entire boat underwater, its red emergency flag visible even under the surface of the churning ocean.

"Half of those men didn't have on lifejackets." Liam steps up beside Serena, his mouth dropping open. "They'll never make it."

Without thinking, Serena rushes past Liam.

"Wait!" he calls.

Before he can even finish the word, she has jumped on top of the railing. Something clasps around her hand. She tries pulling away and it only squeezes harder. Serena looks to the side. Kai stands on top of the railing, their fingers are already interlocked. He is not going to hold her back—he is going to jump with her.

"It has to be quick," she says. "Don't stay in longer than you have to."

Kai nods. "Stay close."

Turning to the churning water, they jump in together. This time, Serena anticipates the cold and the bitter taste. Her transformation is still not pretty, but it isn't a disaster. It is not the same case with Kai, but he will have to work it out on his own. Serena respectfully turns her back as he struggles. Several more maidens splash into the water next, adding to the chaos of the seas as they flop around, grabbing at their chest and gills—both refusing to work properly.

As soon as the majority of them manage to form tails, Serena gives several sharp clicks of her tongue, beckoning her people to follow her. The Undine form a tight, two-column line. Serena is at the front, swimming shoulder to shoulder with Kai. The rest stay close behind.

Serena and Kai angle down sharply to avoid a large chunk of the sailboat tumbling through the water. After the obstruction passes, Serena gasps at the turmoil before her. Ungainlies float in the water, their clothes and hair rippling as if they are in a slow motion breeze. Some are clawing frantically forward, making no progress at all and going in the wrong direction. The dark skies above give them no clue as to which way is up and which way is down.

The unconscious Ungainlies are more worrisome, though in their state of inertia they will find their way to the top faster than those trying to swim.

One Ungainly has latched onto an unconscious shipmate, and he paddles with frantic arms, trying to get them both to the surface. Neither of them will make it.

Serena dives deep and her columns follow. Once they are below the worst of the aftermath, she arches her body and angles up for the ascent. Despite what she know will happen by the end of the day—fevers, nausea, and headaches, the rush of icy cold water through her gills and into her body is invigorating. She picks up speed, Kai remaining steady and strong beside her.

Approaching the humans from underneath, the column spreads out, each with eyes on separate targets. Chins lifted up, the maidens slice through water as efficiently as shark fins. Reaching both arms out, Serena grabs two Ungainlies by latching onto the clothing at the back of their necks. One is not moving, probably unconscious by now, and the other starts waving all four limbs wildly as if he can ward off the mysterious force. Serena keeps him turned away from her.

Further over, Kai has grabbed another Ungainly. This one is more adamant to see what is pushing him. Thankfully Kai has also found a piece of the ship—flat wood he keeps in between him and the man. When they reach the surface, Kai pushes the wood into the Ungainly who latches on, able to keep afloat.

Serena is almost to the top, too, when she realizes the Ungainly she carries that she thought was unconscious has opened his eyes and is staring directly at her. His lids are heavy, and there is no sharp shine, but he gazes at Serena with what curiosity he can muster.

With a grimace at her own blunder, Serena pushes both arms up with all the strength she has. Two Ungainly heads break the surface, transitioning

from the turmoil underwater straight into the squall above. Serena moves away before poking her own head above to check on them. They are helping each other but are barely able to stay afloat with the waves intent on pushing them back under.

"Look!" one of them shouts.

Serena turns her head, trusting her scales to help her blend in with the dark water. Both the tugboat and the sailboat from her fleet surge forward, ropes held at the ready for rescue operations.

"Over here!" The Ungainlies wave their arms in the air, hoarse voices shouting for help as they expend what little energy they have left.

The sailboat reaches them first. Fluttering her tail, Serena moves back, disappearing into the storm but staying close enough to observe. Ropes fly over, their knotted ends dipping into the water. Serena holds her breath, hoping her maidens on the ship don't reveal themselves. Only pack member faces peer over the railing. Dipping below, Serena watches as the maidens that were aboard the sailboat dive into the water.

She sighs, knowing they all will have a long night ahead of them, but they have to keep their distance from humans. There was no other choice.

The pair of Ungainlies in the water kick with tired legs and manage to catch a rope but have no strength to pull themselves up.

"Heads up!" Doug's voice rings out from the ship. He throws another rope—this one has a loop at one end. The more coherent of the two slips the rope under the arms of his shipmate, then waves. Almost immediately the human is hoisted out of the water. In short order he disappears onto the deck of the sailboat and the looped rope is thrown back in the water for the second man.

Serena leaves them to it, diving back under in search of more who need help. She finds an unconscious young man—he can't be much older than her. Long hair floats in front of his face, tickling the beginnings of a skimpy beard.

Grabbing hold of the back of his vest, ensuring he faces away from her in case he wakes up, Serena begins the race to the top. She makes better time when Kai moves in on the other side of the Ungainly, helping her with the load. Just before they reach the surface, Serena gives warning by pushing her tail fins into open air, then slapping them against the water.

"Hoy, look over there!"

The pack members on board have seen, and they are attempting to distract the Ungainlies. Kai and Serena dive back under with their patient, making a wide arc then circle back up gaining speed. They break through and sail into the air, each holding the Ungainly under his arms. He is heavier than they expect, dragged down by extra layers of sopping wet clothing. It isn't long before Serena knows they won't make the height they need to.

Luckily, one of the pack members anticipated that. Waiting on top of a mast, he jumps. With one hand on a thick rope, he swings out and around, colliding with the trio in mid-air. Serena and Kai fall back empty-handed, and the pack member and his new load slam into a sail, sliding down to safety.

The Undine are back in the water before the Ungainlies notice them. Finding one more victim, the next transfer goes more smoothly, and the other maidens have caught on. After a quick sweep of the wreckage area, Serena returns to the tug, using the assistance of one of their ropes to board the ship. Kai comes sweeping in after her.

"Darcy," Serena calls. "The humans are going to need your help on the sailboat. I can't send my healers over there."

When there is no response, Serena looks up, staring at the back of Darcy's head. "Darcy?"

Fingernails scratching wood, Darcy leaves marks in the railing that sends chills running down Serena's body better than the arctic waters can.

When Darcy turns to look at Serena, her face is white. "I've lost Aiden."

"What?" Serena takes a step closer.

"I can't find him—I've looked all over the ship… " But Darcy is no longer looking around the ship—she is looking out to sea. "He must've been washed overboard, but I don't know where."

"No," says Serena, thinking back to his reaction after she helped the whales. "He has gone to help."

"Bring him back to me," Darcy whispers to no one in particular. She is in shock, but Serena has to leave her to her own devices.

"Liam!" Serena shouts, looking for her brother.

He drops the rope he is helping to tow in and is by Serena's side quickly. Keeping her voice low out of respect for Darcy, Serena whispers to her brother, "I need your bracelet. The one Danny gave you."

He slides it off his wrist and into Serena's hand. "Why? What happened?"

"I think Aiden went into the water. I need to find him. He was given his own bracelet, right?"

"Right," says Liam. "I'm coming with you."

"No."

"Yes."

Serena is already headed to the railing of the boat, adjusting the oversized bracelet to fit her thin arm. "I can't look for him if I'm worried about keeping your own dumb head above water," she hisses.

"And what if your fevers come back while you are in The Deep? Then what happens to your *dumb* head?"

"Stop it, both of you." Kai steps in between the siblings. "I will go with her. Here." He spins Serena around, unclasping the necklace Danny gave her and handing it to Liam. Then he takes his own necklace off and puts it on Serena. He looks at Liam. "If we are not back within fifteen minutes, now you can find her. Okay?"

"Okay," Liam huffs.

"Okay?" Kai nudges Serena.

She adjusts the new piece of jewelry around her neck in distaste, feeling like Liam's pet more than anything else. "Fine," she says.

For the second time that afternoon, Kai and Serena are diving into the poisoned waters together. Once she is submerged in the darkness, Serena holds her wrist in front of her, paying attention to the tiny, carved werewolf eyes. They are already glowing bright. Kai gestures to the ship above them. Bracelets wrapped around wrists on the wolves above are causing it to light up. Quickly, Kai and Serena swim away from the ship, toward the Ungainly wreckage.

Rushing through the debris field, Kai searches for any Ungainlies or stray maidens left behind. Serena keeps an eye on her bracelet. Angling down into the dark waters, she finally spots a small glow within the eyes of either werewolf at the end of the band. Urging her tired body forward, she watches as the luminescence burns brighter and brighter until they are as red as Liam's the day he transformed while she was pinned underneath him.

Serena looks up and sees the whole of the Ungainly sailboat sinking. In a round window of one of the rooms below deck there are three sharp

scrapes smudged across the inside of the window. The spread of the marks match that of a small werewolf's claws.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Picking up speed, Serena shoots straight for the window. She places her hand against the claw mark, then bangs against it. Nothing.

As she peers inside, the ship sinks further and further. It is dark, but using her own hair's bioluminescence she illuminates the area. A face pops up right on the other side of the window. Serena jumps back, then recognizes the face. Arista.

Eyes wide, Serena moves back toward the window. Arista shows Serena a ball of fur under her arm—an unconscious ball of fur. Keeping one hand tight over Aiden's mouth and snout, Arista looks at Serena.

Banging on the window, Serena grows hot at the cheeks.

What are you doing?

Kai pulls Serena back, pointing to his lips then to Arista. Inside the room, Arista turns to Aiden, places her lips over his nose and blows. She is using the oxygen her own body pulls from the water to keep him breathing.

Quickly, Serena and Kai move to the deck of the ship, locating the hatch leading below deck. It is completely smashed in by the main mast. Serena and Kai both get to one side, pushing on the heavy wood, but it is tied to the ship in a hopeless tangle of ropes and sails.

Serena and Kai swim to the window. Arista is keeping watch, her eyebrows knitted together with worry. Backing up, Kai thrusts forward, ramming the window with his fist then his shoulder. Serena swims a quick circle around the ship, looking for another way in. Kai is still ramming the window when she returns.

Serena leaves Kai, Arista, and Aiden behind. Her fins give frantic flutters in the race to the surface as she tries to fight back the sense of debilitating desperation. Once she breaks through, in the thick of the storm, she opens her mouth and sings.

High notes and a slow, sonorous tune contrast the booming thunder. It stands out from the storm, impossible not to hear. The tug has followed, and its spotlight comes to rest on Serena. She squints, shielding her eyes from the bright beam but does not stop singing. Heads pop up above the railing, but this song is meant only for one.

A dark shadow leaps from behind the spotlight. When it comes down in front of it, Serena can only see the messy outline of fur. Liam has already transformed—his wolf stands ready to help, if only Serena can keep him from drowning.

The tug's spotlight leaves Serena to follow Liam, highlighting outstretched claws and a bulging torso and arms. He splashes into the water. Serena doesn't wait until he comes up for air. She dives under, going straight for Liam. Using the momentum he already has from the dive in, she comes up behind him, pushing down on his shoulders and thrusting with her tail. Kai joins, pushing Liam down and leading him straight to the window. There is no time to search for a weaker entry point.

Once Arista's face comes into view, she holds up Aiden's limp body to show Liam, then backs away from the window. Tails beating against the water in sync, Serena and Kai pick up speed. They don't slow, even once they are close enough to the ship that they know they won't be able to stop in time. With one final push forward, they release Liam and he bursts into the window, scattering sharp shards of glass in a soundless spray. Serena and Kai angle up, crashing into the side of the ship, and turning somersaults over the rough planks. Cracked wood slices into Serena's shoulder. Steadying herself against the ship, she looks up to see Kai with abrasions across his face.

The sound of splintering wood causes them to look down, and they see Liam tearing through the side of the boat. Reaching in through the broken porthole window, he pulls back, slicing a larger hole for Arista. Dodging more ship debris, Serena and Kai slink down, waiting as patiently as they can. Her bracelet still glows bright red, reminding her of what lies inside the boat.

As soon as Arista is through, Serena rushes forward, wrapping one arm around Arista's waist. Careful not to disturb Arista's delicate hold over Aiden's snout, Serena rushes them to open air. Behind them, Kai helps Liam by supplementing the wolf's very unproductive doggy paddle with powerful strokes of his tail.

The ocean's surface, pounded into a white froth by the storm, is just ahead. Arista releases Aiden's face, and the maidens move to either side of the small wolf, picking up speed. It is a risk, but this will be the fastest way to get him on board.

Bursting back into the storm together, Serena and Arista fly up, their patient between them with his head bouncing. Arching their backs, the Undine traverse the small distance to the boat quickly, almost overshooting it. Netting shoots up into the air in front of them and the maidens automatically curl their bodies around the small wolf, absorbing most of the blow. Course rope cuts into their shoulders and backs until they hit the hard deck.

Groaning, Serena unfurls her fins, allowing them to separate into legs. Arista does the same, scooting back to reveal the ball of wet fur between them.

Serena looks at Arista over Aiden. Both of them are breathing hard, limbs limp with exhaustion.

"Thank Poseidon I didn't still have you in chains," Serena says.

"I'm rather grateful for that myself, your majesty." Arista nods.

The storm is finally clearing out, the sun breaking through gray clouds, but a shadow falls over the maidens.

It is Darcy, her face pale and her posture frozen. Colin stands behind her, practically having to hold up his wife. The clan's only doctor, nurse, and mother—always a flurry of activity especially during a crisis—is unable to even move when her own son is seriously injured.

Red flashes behind Darcy like the Ungainly emergency signal. Simone pushes her way toward Aiden, dropping beside him. Briefly laying her ear against his chest she announces. "His pulse his weak." She puts her hand in front of his snout. "And he's not breathing."

Without hesitation, Simone shoves both hands inside the werewolf's mouth, her delicate pinkish skin scraping against sharp teeth. She feels around, pulling only small bits of debris from his mouth, then pulls his tongue forward, and aligns his head with his spine. Tilting his chin back slightly, she is opening the airway.

Scooting around so her knees are in front of Aiden, Simone wraps her hands around snout and lower jaw, squeezing them shut. Finally pausing, Simone looks up at Serena. "I never understood why Hailey taught us this… until now." She takes a deep breath, squeezes her eyes shut, then brings her mouth to Aiden's snout. Blowing five quick breaths into his nostrils, Simone tears her mouth away. Liam has come up beside her and quickly wipes her mouth with his shirt.

Simone gives him a grateful smile, then turns to Serena. "Is his chest rising when I do it?"

"Oh—my apologies," says Serena. "I wasn't watching." She scoots closer, pinning her gaze to the wolf for any sign of life.

Simone's lips curl up in distaste, but she puts her mouth to his nose again, delivering five more breaths.

"His chest is rising!" says Serena, her voice piercing through the hushed silence.

When Simone pulls away, releasing his snout, Aiden's chest continues to rise and fall on its own. A collective sigh of relief runs through the people surrounding him.

"Aiden, Aiden!" Simone shakes the wolf's shoulder.

He blinks open his eyes, pupils shrinking as he focuses. When his gaze moves to his mother, he flips his tail once, giving a sign that he is okay.

Darcy sinks to her knees, shaking and crying. Serena wraps the woman in a hug as a fatigued crowd gathers around the group.

"Can you transform?" Simone asks Aiden, running a hand down his rib cage and spine. "I don't think anything is broken."

Slowly, bones do break themselves in half, protruding out the side of Aiden's face, then sinking in. His tail shrinks between his legs and fur floats to the ground until there is only a small, naked boy left. Someone hands a blanket through and his mother tucks it around him. "I'm so glad you are okay, honey." She wipes tears from her cheek. 'But if you ever do anything like that again, you will be grounded for the rest of your life."

Lips quivering, Aiden nods while making a brave attempt at keeping the tears from coming.

Colin kneels down next to his son and wife. His hand brushes through a pile of Aiden's wolf hair. "What's this?" he asks.

Darcy takes one spindly piece of the mane, squeezing the length of it with her other thumb and forefinger. An oily sheen of film is left behind on her fingertips.

Simone turns away from her patient to look. "From the oil spill they have been talking about. Oil doesn't dissolve in the water, it just floats in large globs. Looks like the storm put us right through one."

Darcy drops the hair, looking up as Arista. The maiden uses a blanket to wipe the oil off her body. Kiera, the first maiden to dive in, joins the group, coming to stand right behind Arista. Serena breathes a sigh of

relief, but Darcy waves her hand wildly in front of her. "Don't retract your scales. Tell all the maidens—don't!"

Arista glances at Kiera, who has bare skin already showing on the majority of her legs, arms, and midsection.

"Why not?' asks Kiera, having already retracted her scales.

Darcy turns to Serena. "The oil must be what made you sick. When you retract your scales, you are introducing it directly into your bloodstream, and possibly your digestive system."

Standing next to Darcy, Liam begins wiping frantically at himself.

Simone rolls her eyes. "The wolves just shed their fur—they won't be poisoned."

"Right," Liam says, handing his towel to Serena instead. "I knew that."

Using one end on herself, Serena helps Darcy towel off her son, too. He is still very weak, barely able to hold up his head and shivering. Gently taking his wrist to extend his arm, Serena runs the towel down his limb, wiping away any remaining smudges of oil.

Fresh pinpricks appear on the inside of his arm. Serena wipes again and beads of blood pop up under the pressure.

Darcy leans in to see what Serena is studying. "Oh, Aiden… not again."

The child does not bother to look, he knows what they have seen. "It's important," he mumbles.

"This is extremely fresh," Serena says. She looks up at Arista, the only maiden Aiden has been alone with in the recent hour.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Chains!" Serena orders, pointing to Arista.

"Wait, I—" Arista can’t finish. Kai is jerking her around to place the chains on her wrists.

"Her dry bag," says Serena.

Unclipping it from around her waist, Kai opens the flap and reaches inside. It isn't long before he comes up with a full pouch of thick, red liquid.

Hushed silence falls over the maidens and werewolves on the tugboat deck as Liam steps forward to take the blood from Kai.

"Oh, Poseidon," Arista mumbles. "Why do you hate me so much?"

Liam looks at her, eyes blazing. "Where did you get this?"

Arista sighs. "Where do you think?"

Taking a step forward, he holds up the pouch, squeezing hard enough the veins in his arms bulge blue. "Nothing good ever came from this," he growls.

Chains clink as Arista squares off with Liam. "Only when it is in the wrong hands."

Simone dumps the rest of the contents of Arista's dry bag out on the deck. A syringe, tubing, and a plastic bag of wet wipes lay in a heap. Then three vials of hydrocoral roll across the deck. Simone stops one with her foot, picks it up, and removes the cork to smell it. She looks at Arista. "You thief."

"I needed it for a new potion." Arista's eyebrows rise into pleading arches, but she is pushed back when Liam shoves her aside. "Wait! I need that, too!" Arista shouts as Liam walks past with the pouches of blood.

Without looking back, Liam throws them overboard into the retreating storm. Arista lunges toward him. Liam turns, wrapping his large hand around her throat. "Quiet, mermaid—before I silence you myself."

"And if he doesn't, I will." Simone steps up beside Liam. She looms over Arista, even when Liam has Arista on the tips of her toes.

No one protests. As Serena glances at Undine and werewolves side by side watching the standoff, she sees they look ready to join in, and not on

behalf of Arista. The traitor Undine is universally hated, and it is bringing the two species closer together.

Serena remembers what it feels like to be the outcast, nothing frustrating her more than the whole of Society looking at her like she was a traitor when she was only trying to help.

"Wait!" shouts Serena. "Let her go, Liam."

He glances over his shoulder at Serena but does not release Arista.

"And both of you step back," Serena continues. "We will hear her out. And it will not be after we've already made our judgments." To prove her point, Serena puts her hand out in front of Kai for the key to Arista's chains.

Thankfully, Kai obliges and the key drops into her palm. Squeezing her way in between Simone and Liam, Serena unlocks Arista. Rubbing her wrists, Arista turns to face the crowd.

"Tell us everything," says Serena.

Arista takes a shaky breath. "I've been giving Liam's blood to Aiden, Xavier, and a number of other werewolves."

"How long?" demands Colin.

"Alaric started it," says Arista. "And once he passed to the afterlife, I continued." Arista meets the angry father's eyes. "Even when I was in chains, I was able to talk Aiden through doing it himself."

Darcy lunges for Arista, and there is a shoving match that almost results in both Arista and Serena going back in the water. A loud, shrill whistle slices through the air. Those closest to Liam jump or lean back, covering their ears. He scans the people around him, satisfied all movement on board has stopped, then he smiles down at Serena, pulling her upright. "You aren't the only one who can sing."

Nodding her thanks, Serena turns to Arista. "For Poseidon's sake, tell us *why* you did it." *Preferably before I regret stepping out on a limb for you.*

"Very well." Arista straightens herself, running a soft palm down her braided hair. "Liam is the only werewolf that has the royal bloodline—and it is the most powerful blood we have."

Most of the crowd has relaxed their posture, and the sky above lightens as the sun attempts to break through the clouds. The hazy glow lessens the harsh angles on Arista's face as she speaks. "By administering Liam's blood into a host body, which is preferably young, strong, or one with a

hardy build, the host begins to produce antibodies. From that, I hope to ascertain immunogoblins from the host's system."

"You mean antivenom?" asks Darcy. Her breath is under control, and her face isn't quite so red. She moves back to sit down by Aiden. "You are trying to cure him of being a werewolf?"

"No." Arista shakes her head. "It won't work like that—your son will be hairy the rest of his life, I'm afraid."

Darcy lets out a sigh of relief, and Serena doesn't blame her. Darcy has come to love all of her son, including his beast.

Arista continues, "The antivenom, when mixed with other properties used in the original potion—

"Like the hydrocoral," says Simone.

"Please don't interrupt." Arista doesn't skip a beat, she is on a roll, excited about explaining her work. "But yes, like the hydrocoral—it will create antibodies which then can be administered to a pregnant Undine."

All subtle movement from the crowd—shifting from foot to foot, scratching, and drying off with towels—ceases, as if they are frozen at the mention of pregnant Undine.

Arista catches on to the change in mood, and her voice goes soft. "But it takes several small doses administered over eight to ten weeks until antibodies peak in the host system, and it hasn't been without its side effects, obviously." She runs her palm over her braid again, shifting the hair so it lies over her shoulder. "I was going to call it Cordelia's Serum, in honor of our fallen maiden. With this medicine, mothers shouldn't become so sick during the birthing process, and it should reverse the effect of weak male calflings so we won't have to give them the transformation potion." Arista is looking at Aiden now.

Colin helps him to sit up, supporting his back. "She explained all this to you? And you agreed?" he asks his son.

Aidan slowly nods, looking at Serena. "I wanted to help."

Darcy hugs him, her tears starting all over again.

"Do you think it will work?" Liam asks her.

Releasing Aiden, Darcy wipes her cheeks and nods. "It has potential, but it is not without its faults."

Arista frowns, watching Darcy get to her feet.

"The humans use certain animals, like horses, to create antibodies, not each other," says Darcy.

"I was fresh out of horses," mumbles Arista.

"Right. But there are other options. Sharks being one of them."

"We can help there." Simone steps forward. "Hailey taught us how to care for certain animals, even administering injections if needed."

"But most importantly, how did you plan to purify and separate the antibodies from the blood?" asks Darcy. "How will you isolate the active ingredient?"

"Sneaking blood transfusions into the werewolf population was difficult enough. I am approaching this solution one problem at a time," says Arista.

There is an awkward silence while Darcy appears to be mulling over the medical procedures in her head. Finally she sighs, her fingertips going to her temples. "It will be difficult getting necessary supplies, especially sequestered in Ivvaavik as we will be. But with a little outside help, I think this is possible."

"Then it will be as you say," says Serena. "Arista will continue to investigate medicinal potions, but under the guidance and with consultation of Darcy and the Undine healers. And Arista—no more injections on any werewolf."

Arista raises a finger in question.

"Or Undine," says Serena before Arista can even ask.

Arista's shoulders slump.

"Your heart was in the right place." Serena touches Arista’s elbow softly. "Just not your head."

"Many thanks, your majesty." Arista curtsies. "I think."

"Heads up!" shouts a voice from the wheelhouse. "Comin' up on the sailboat. Humans on board."

Occupants on the tug's deck reluctantly move into action. Sick and injured are escorted below and those left above help clean up the storm's aftermath.

"Stay with your son," Serena tells Darcy. "Besides, you look like you could use some down time, so to speak." She smiles.

"Thank you," says Darcy, starting to follow Colin, who is carrying Aiden below. She stops and turns. "Our stop at port tonight will have freshwater rivers running into the sea. We should find a way to get all of your maidens on land to wash off."

"As you say," says Serena.

On her knees in front of Serena, Arista is cleaning up the spilled contents of her dry bag. Serena holds out her hand and Arista pauses. Finally, she sighs, passing over the syringes and tubes. "I have none of Liam's blood left, anyway."

"But he does. And I want to make sure you are not tempted to get at it," says Serena. She gives the paraphernalia to Simone.

The healer stores it carefully in her own dry bag. She closes it and looks up, frowning when she sees the look on Serena's face. "Not to worry, your majesty. I think this is going to work."

"I hope so," says Serena. "But right now we need to focus on surviving the night. Imagine the difficulty you had with my fever, and multiply it by at least twenty." Serena snaps her head to Simone. "Were the healers in the water at all?"

She shakes her head. "Liam forbade it."

"At least someone was thinking ahead," mumbles Serena.

A loud clunk behind the two maidens cause them both to jump.

"It's starting," says Simone, kneeling beside an Undine who has collapsed mid-stride.

Serena helps roll the maiden over. Blonde hair falls back from her face. "It's Kiera…"

"She was weak already," says Simone. "And the first Undine in the water. Let's get her below—the Ungainlies don't need to know we have an emergency."

"I'll help." A pack member kneels, sliding one arm under Kiera's head and one under her knees before Simone can protest. Serena recognizes him as Kiera's partner patient, the seasick werewolf.

Serena watches the innocent maiden as she is carried away, her blonde curls blowing in the breeze and limp limbs jostling with every step. Thunder echoes in the distance as the gale makes its way inland. Serena sighs. "The storm is just beginning."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The next scheduled stop is Juneau, the last stop of the race.

"We have time," Liam says. "The rest of the racers waited a day."

"Let's pull off before the city." Serena can already see the subtle glow of lights further up the coast. "We need to heal, and we don't need to do it under threat of discovery. Besides, we have to wait for the rest of our fleet."

Only the tug and the sailboat got caught up in the heart of the storm. She is hoping the other three vessels stayed in the protected narrows before entering Chatham Sound.

"Okay," agrees Liam. "I'll go tell the captain to signal the sailboat. We'll tell them to go ahead to Juneau so the injured Ungainlies can get help, and they can intercept any of our other boats if we miss them."

Serena goes below deck as they get closer to the sailboat. The enclosed space is stuffy and Serena is still fully armored with scales, not able to retract any until she can bathe in fresh water. Another maiden besides Kiera has fallen sick, both of them already running fevers. The three Undine healers plus Darcy are working hard to combat the first signs of sickness. Serena notices Darcy never strays too far from Aiden or her other boys, and that Arista has very wisely chosen to keep to the far corner of the room.

"When we go ashore, we'll need to set up a sick camp, preferably close to the river." Simone pauses by Serena long enough to wipe her hands.

"As you say," says Serena. "I'll send scouts out for fresh water."

The boat stops soon after, the entire hull shuddering as the anchor drops. Liam pokes his head in from the hatch. "Nowhere to dock. We'll have to go ashore using the row boats."

Transferring the entire crew to land is slow going with only two small boats for the job. It is dusk by the time everyone is ashore except for a skeleton crew of pack members left behind to watch the tug. Serena stands on the beach looking south for any sign of the rest of her fleet.

"Your majesty?"

Serena turns; it is Arista.

The maiden fidgets, nervous fingers jittering at her sides. "It still feels unnatural to call you that."

Smiling, Serena nods. "Sometimes it still takes me a moment to respond to it. I look around for some other queen that is being addressed, until I remember the new queen is me."

Arista seems to relax at the candid conversation. "Well, for the record, I think you are doing a good job."

"Thank you, Arista." Serena raises an eyebrow, wondering what the maiden wants.

"Oh, I was just going to suggest you don't wait too long to wash."

"I see," says Serena, running her eyes over Arista's scales. They still carry the thin sheen of oil themselves. Serena suspects Arista does not want to face Society alone just yet—not unless she can have her pseudo-ally next to her. "Let us go together, then."

The ground is still wet from the storm, but soft moss prevents the evidence of webbed feet imprints from forming. A thick pine scent permeates the air.

"This way," says Arista.

They follow the sound of babbling water. As they walk, Serena spots Kai working to set up tents. He must have already bathed, as his scales are retracted showing bare skin from the waist up. The oil is replaced with a different sheen—sweat.

She looks down as he glances up. There is still work to do, and she doesn't want to keep him from it. Liam steps forward from evenly spaced pack members. "We've scouted the area and we'll keep guards posted around the camp. Simone wanted the sick bay set up on the other side of the river so the noises don't keep everyone else up."

Serena frowns.

"It is a good idea," says Liam. "Half of you will be exhausted tomorrow either from fevers or from treating them. The other half needs to at least be functional."

"As you say," says Serena. She raises her nose the air and sniffs, glancing sharply at Liam. "I smell wolf."

He shrugs. "I gave them the go ahead. They can help keep away any curious humans, or animals."

Serena makes a pointed look at the moon. It is exactly halfway through its cycle—as far away from full as it can get.

"I know, I know. At least we can tell who has been—" Liam stops mid-sentence as a large wolf limps past the group.

"Is that Xavier?" she asks once he is out of sight.

"Yep," says Liam.

"That one was my fault," mumbles Arista. "I upped the dosage on his request. I suppose exacerbated anger issues were a side effect." Arista turns to Serena and curtsies. "My apologies, your majesty." Next Arista looks at Liam and waits, almost as if she expects an apology from him for her treatment earlier.

Liam stares down his nose at Arista and crosses his arms, his lips remaining firmly stuck together.

"Will there be any side effects in discontinuing the treatments so suddenly?" asks Serena, interrupting the stalemate.

"We'll find out," Arista says. "But if there is" —she puts a hand on Liam's shoulder— "we have our solution right here."

"Over my dead—"

"Liam!" interrupts Serena. "Take care with your words." She leans in closer to him, lowering her voice. "We don't want to give her any ideas."

Serena is only half kidding, and Arista giggles behind them.

A distant, anguished moan floats through the woods. The trio look in the direction of the river. It is the sick bay.

"You know," says Liam, voice soft. "Since we left our homes… since we have been travelin' together, workin' together—"

"Sleeping together, saving lives together," offers Arista.

"That too." Liam stiffens at her interruption. He clears his throat, getting back to his original thought. "No one has died."

Serena takes a moment to remember all who perished up until The Migration. Scores of male Undine—either as calflings or in battle, her mother, the King, Cordelia, Ervin, Sasha, Alaric, and several other werewolves during the battles. "You are right," Serena says, looking in the direction of the moans, then back at Liam. "Let's keep it that way."

"Whatever it takes," he agrees.

A few moments pass, and Arista has to chime in. She apparently can't stand silence. "Well, maybe not everyone has escaped the afterlife. We don’t really know, do we?"

Serena's hand automatically goes to the satellite phone in her dry bag, and she exchanges a glance with Liam. "Maybe we should," says Serena.

He considers Serena for a moment before shaking his head. "We ain't callin' no one until we reach Ivvavik."

Serena knows he is right. They can't go back, and she doesn't even want to be tempted. She runs the pad of her thumb over the smooth rectangle that bulges from the bottom of her dry bag one more time, then lets her hand drop to her side. "I need to wash off," she says. "These scales grow cumbersome after a while."

Arista follows Serena toward the river, bidding Liam goodnight for the both of them.

Zigzagging through the trees, Serena steps quietly, evoking the same sense of adventure and thrill she used to get when absconding to the forests just outside The Deep. Behind her, Arista walks with similar dexterity, and Serena has to remember Arista has just as much experience with the woods, if not more.

Stepping out from the tree line and onto a large boulder, Serena drinks in the sight of the stream.

"The water is warm," says Arista. "Or at least warmer than the air."

Steam rises from the babbling river, blanketing the area and hugging the bathing maidens.

A steep drop in air temperature is the direct result of the storm passing through—it's as if Mother Nature is offering a reward for having endured her wrath.

Dropping their dry bags, Serena and Arista step carefully down a cascade of slick rocks, helping each other as they go. Arista enters the water first, not hesitating to lie down until she is fully submerged. She wiggles in delight, inadvertently splashing nearby maidens who frown then move away. Serena laughs at the indifferent maiden.

When Serena enters the water, it is slightly more graceful. She is aware of too many eyes on her, as if they are at Assembly and she is ascending the throne. Despite the awkward itch that runs down her spine, Serena feels a pang of homesickness for the familiar caves.

Maidens shift, giving Serena a respectful distance and opening up the deepest part of the river for her. The queen does not object. Here the water is crisp and runs slightly faster, already brushing at her scales in a cleansing wash.

She takes in a deep breath of steamy air, imagining the healing atmosphere sloughing away what oil might be left inside of her. Maidens

in a circle around her tend to themselves, their colors casting effervescent hues on the surrounding steam and water.

Rainbow-colored oil seeps off their bodies, gathering in pools on the surface of the water, and beginning the trek down river back into the very same sound it came from. Serena imagines the pod of whales she helped through the Ungainly nets. They've survived one obstacle just to swim through another.

Shaking her head, Serena continues to rub the oil from her body. Once her upper arm is clean, she carefully retracts the scales. Rustling in the foliage on the other side of the river causes all maidens to look up. Simone and another healer each carry one end of a blanket cradling an unconscious maiden.

Blonde locks droop over the edge of the fabric, and Serena knows which maiden it is. When the healers lower their patient, nearby maidens gasp. Kiera is pasty white and her skin is covered in a sheen of sweat. Her chest rises slowly—too much time passes in between her breaths.

Angling their patient so her lower body up to her waist sits in the water, the healers lay her back on a mossy bank and begin scrubbing exposed skin and scales.

Sarafina, who stands closest to Kiera, begins to hum. Evandre joins in, their voices wavering together until they complement one another. It is the Undine healing song. Serena sang it once to Robbie, Darcy's youngest boy, in a motel bathroom as he suffered separation pains.

One by one, each maiden joins the song adding underlying base beats, sonorous high notes, or steady median tones that blend the song together in perfect harmony.

Inserting lyrics, the Undine call upon the ancients to restore Kiera. They call upon Poseidon to heal the water that is their home, and they call upon their werewolf protectors for a safe journey through perilous territories.

The forest moves around them, and Serena knows the song is working. Pack members, some transformed and some not, appear around the rocky banks. Encouraged, Serena stands up in the river, opens her mouth, and allows tentative notes to breeze past her lips. Although Serena is perfectly content to find harmony within the hymn, as usual Society has other plans for their queen. Maidens soften their voices, blending them into background composition.

Serena pauses briefly, glancing around as river water cascades down her scales. She steps onto an underwater boulder that lifts her above the rest of the maidens. They are now surrounded by pack members, waiting and watching. Even Xavier, still in his wolf form, settles onto his belly to show he will not be a threat.

Chest expanding as she takes a breath in, Serena pushes it out again, her vibrant voice gliding over the river like silk strands. A gentle wind moves in, carrying Serena's voice further. It wraps around Kiera, tousling her hair. It touches each of the maidens and, in turn, each of the werewolves. It breathes strength into Aiden, who stands at the river’s edge with his parents and brothers. Serena surreptitiously sneaks in her own small prayer for Kai and all those suffering from memories of past violence between the species.

The pace of the song quickens as Serena ascends a series of tones, each note melding into the next. She is supported by her surrounding maidens who still sing, adding layer and depth. Rich and vibrant, the song climaxes in an interlacing ambiance.

Serena turns, almost stunned to find Kai standing directly in front of her. She releases her final note in time with the maidens.

Stepping forward, Kai wraps one arm around her waist, pulling her close in a brazen move. Serena only has a second to consider that everyone is watching before his lips join with hers. They kiss while fragments of the song still echo over the water.

Too soon, Kai pulls away. Fiery green eyes burn through Serena. "It shall be as you say," he says.

It takes Serena a moment to remember her healing song and all of the maidens' pleas to the ancients.

Kai bends to one knee in a deep bow, and the maidens follow suit with curtsies. Around her, pack members place closed fists over their hearts, and the wolves dip their heads.

Everyone is vowing a safe journey to their queen, and Serena knows they are united at last.

Chapter Forty

Once the very public bathing procession breaks apart with the wolves resuming their patrols and the maidens either retiring for the night or offering assistance to the healers, Serena and Kai retreat to their own tent. This time, it is very close to neighbors. After the storm, no one wants to remain too far apart from each other.

Kai insists Serena lie down while he settles the rest of the camp. She doesn't argue, but sleep doesn't come. Every time she closes her eyes all she can picture is the depths of the ocean where Aiden almost ended up.

The sounds of the encampment settle, replaced by a crackling fire that heats those still awake. She discerns the voices partaking in the type of inconsequential conversation that occurs around a late night blaze. Identifying the voices of Liam and Kai is easy. They sit next to each other, based on their number of low-spoken side conversations, and they are close to Serena's tent. Arista is also there—her high-pitched voice seeming to grate on everyone's nerves as they interrupt her each time she attempts to talk.

She has a rough road ahead of her in making friends, thinks Serena—almost endearingly.

There are a few other voices of pack members Serena doesn't recognize.

Conversation floats from storms to ships to animals of the forest. Just as Serena starts to drift off to sleep, Kai's nickname for her—*Moonshine*—snaps her back to the conscious world.

"You know it's a drink, right?" Liam says. "A human alcoholic drink."

"What does it taste like?" asks Kai.

"It's strong—kind of bitter, at first. It takes some gettin' used to," says Liam. "But it’s addictive. Some of the pack members started makin' it during the worst of Alaric's reign. It takes the edge off. It makes things better."

There are a few moments of silence before Kai speaks. "What you just described, is Serena to me."

"Strong and kind of bitter." Liam snorts. "Yeah, I suppose it fits."

"I was leaning more toward the 'makes things better' part," says Kai.

Serena smiles to herself inside the tent.

"I could use a little moonshine," pipes up one of the pack members.

Serena can imagine both Liam and Kai going tense with closed fists.

"Er—the drink kind, not the queen kind," he clarifies.

"Me too." Arista laughs.

Serena turns her head, and she can see Arista's shadow cast by the fire scoot closer to the pack member. He places an arm around her shoulders.

Serena sighs. *She is going to find friends wherever she can.*

A few moments later Serena finally succumbs to restless dreams. She is awakened in what seems like minutes by rough shaking at her shoulder.

"Serena—wake up!"

She pushes away a hand that feels awfully familiar. "Kai?"

"Arista has gone missing."

Serena sits up. "What?" Her brain struggles to process his words. "Where?"

"If we knew where, she wouldn't exactly be missing."

Running a hand down her face, Serena glares at Kai. "Don't get smart with me—not now."

"My apologies," says Kai. He holds his hand out to Serena.

She pulls herself to her feet with his assistance. "Who else is missing?"

"Liam is getting a count of the wolves now."

Serena and Kai step out of the tent just as Liam approaches. "All my wolves are here—it is just your maiden missing."

Serena looks at the smoldering ashes. "We need to go find her." She holds out her hand toward Liam.

Glancing at her outstretched palm, he removes her necklace from his pocket. It should help Serena locate Arista more quickly.

"I'm coming with," says Liam, still holding onto the necklace.

"Wait." Serena stops him. "What if it's a diversion—or a trap? Like for your blood. I don't fully trust Arista yet."

After a brief pause, Liam looks at the ground and kicks at pebbles. "Maybe," he mumbles.

"I'll go," says Kai.

Reluctantly, Liam hands over the necklace.

Serena wraps its chain around the werewolf bracelet she still holds so she can keep an eye on both as she walks.

"Take this, too," Liam says. "It's a rape whistle."

Serena squints, looking at the small device dangling from the end of a rope. "What is rape?" she asks. "And what in Poseidon's name is a whistle?"

A blaze of moonlight bounces off the smooth, silver contraption, flashing across Serena's eyes. "I don't want that thing—" Stumbling back, Serena trips over a fallen log.

Liam extends a hand, catching her at the wrist. Once he has her upright and steady, his arms drop to his sides. "That's it. I'm comin' with."

"I want you here, where I know you are safe." She puts force behind her words, as if that alone would make Liam obey her.

It doesn't have the effect she wants, and Liam turns to start walking.

Kai follows Serena, staying well back from the pair of squabbling siblings.

"Liam, just…" She ducks under another branch that snaps at her face—backlash from Liam's momentum. "I will not allow you to accompany me. And that is an order!"

Liam stops in his tracks. When he turns, his eyes fix on Serena. "Fine, I won't accompany you, then."

Serena takes deep breath and tries to recover some composure, smoothing back stray strands of hair from her braid. "Thank you."

"I'll just have to get there first." Liam grabs both the necklace and the bracelet from Serena's hand and takes off through the forest.

Serena's mouth drops open at Liam's retreating back. She snaps her lips together, drops her head in a determined stance, and runs after him. Unable to go full speed in the dark while trying to keep his eye on a few glowing stones, Liam zigzags through the forest, and Serena is able to keep up.

Once she is close enough, she makes a lunge for the jewelry splayed out in his palm. He pulls his hand back just in time, stepping out of the way, and Serena flies past him straight into a prickly bush.

"Argh!" her shouts of frustration are loud, causing almost as much of a ruckus as the thorn bush she tries to fight her way out of.

Kai catches up and reaches in to pull her out.

"You know, you could help me with him," says Serena. "Tie him down or something."

"Watching you two fight it out is far more entertaining."

"Ow!" exclaims Serena as Kai pulls another thorn stuck in between scales on her shoulder. "This isn't funny, Kai. I see human lights just up the

way there."

"Is that so?" Kai turns and looks. "Are you trying to let them know we are coming?"

"No!" Serena pauses, realizing her mistake. "No," she says again, whispering this time. "Let's get Liam before we lose him."

It turns out the Undine sense of smell works better for locating werewolves than any glowing stone. Serena finds Liam in short order, convincing Kai to scale a tree with her so they can come at Liam from where he least expects it. Shuffling out onto a branch, it creaks under their combined weight. Serena crouches down, eyes glued to Liam who kneels behind a bush below her.

Kai glances forward, toward the lights. His eyes go wide. "Wait, Serena —no!"

But Serena is only focused on revenge. She leans forward, dropping from the tree directly on top of Liam. They both roll until they hit hard pavement.

Untangling themselves, Serena and Liam exchange nervous glances before they turn their attention to the semi-lit parking lot.

A group of five men who have just left a building are staring in their direction. Loud music booms from behind closed doors, shaking the shuttered windows. Reaching back to pull the hood over her head, Serena realizes she no longer even wears the sweatshirt. "Liam—maybe we should go… " Serena whispers out of the corner of her mouth. She risks a glance behind her. Kai waits as steady as the tree that holds him, not taking his eyes off the five men that stand in front of Serena and Liam.

Movement in the group draws attention. The men shift, and Arista peeks out from around one of them. He keeps his heavy arm draped over Arista as a smile lights her face. "I found some new test subjects. Look how big they are!"

"Arista," Serena growls. "Come here. Right. Now." Remembering Ungainly manners, Serena adds one more word. "Please."

Confusion, then indecision flits across Arista's face.

Serena steps forward. "If you do not obey of your own accord, I will have to sing."

Now confusion flits across every Ungainly face. Finally, Arista steps forward, but the arm around her tightens. "I didn't say it was okay to leave yet, missy."

"Let her go!" Serena shouts, taking a step forward.

Liam puts his arm in front of Serena, stopping her.

"That's okay, sweetheart." One of the bigger men comes toward the pair. "You can join us, too."

As he steps into the light, Serena's eyes go wide. The man is twice as big as Liam, and he continues to walk forward.

"Stop right there." Serena says. "Please?"

"I'm not sure these are the type you can order around, negotiate with, or sing to," whispers Liam.

Serena glances from them to Liam and back again, her pulse racing with panic. "Then what are we supposed to do with them?"

"Fight 'em." Liam's hands curl into fists.

"Absolutely not," says Serena. "We have to find another way."

"Just let me know when you have it figured out… sweetheart." His use of the Ungainly nickname sets her cheeks in flames. He steps back, making it clear she is in charge of the situation.

"Simply infuriating," mumbles Serena.

The Ungainly walking toward them seems to grow in size the closer he gets.

"Stop right there, or I'll have to stop you myself!" Serena tries again.

"With what, sweetheart?" he scoffs.

A quick glance around, and Serena's eyes settle on Liam's whistle still dangling from his hand. Grasping his elbow, Serena pushes up to force his hand in the air. "We have a rape whistle!"

Beside her, Liam buries his face in his other hand.

Chapter Forty-One

Laughing, the Ungainlies whoop and holler, some whistling and some even shouting out the word 'rape'.

Liam steps forward, lifting his chin and crossing his arms.

"You gonna blow that whistle?" someone shouts out. The laughter starts up again.

"It ain't my whistle you have to worry about it," says Liam. He waits until the last of them go silent. "It's what lies in wait in the dark behind me."

"He's just bluffing!" yells the one with his arm around Arista. "Let's take the other one, too and get out of here."

"Don’t believe me?" asks Liam. He takes another step to the side and holds an inviting arm out toward Serena. "Fine. Take her."

Serena's mouth drops open as she looks at Liam.

The large Ungainly hesitates, and suddenly he doesn't look so threatening.

Liam takes another step aside just to prove his point.

Interpreting this as a challenge, the Ungainly sneers. "Fine."

Three more steps and he is directly in front of Serena. She lifts her chin to meet his eyes. Light from the streetlamps spills across her face, illuminating her deep blue cheekbones.

His hand freezes inches from her shoulder. This close, Serena can see right into his reddened, bleary eyes. After a night of drinking, he is struggling to process the creature before him. Serena doesn't blame him. She does not belong in his world.

Serena holds her breath, waiting for the Ungainly's decision.

It is a poor one.

With his extended hand, he reaches out, grabbing Serena by the braid. Pulling it into him and slightly down, he smiles having Serena under his control. She is bent back at an awkward angle with her neck exposed.

Pure agitation, both physically and mentally, causes her hair to come to life. Her bioluminescence burns brighter than any streetlamp.

"What in the—"

The man is cut short before he can utter even one of his god's curse words. Kai lunges from the tree, plowing into Serena's captor. By the time she straightens herself, the pair are rolling on the ground. Liam has gone for the rest of the group, which she now understands was why he kept sidestepping away. He needed a clear path.

It leaves Serena in an awkward position with nothing to do. By pushing back three humans at once, Liam leaves Arista free of watchers. Making direct eye contact, Serena points to Arista, then to the area right in front of herself, mouthing the words. "Come here."

Having the grace to look sheepish, Arista walks forward hugging her elbows and keeping her eyes pinned to the ground. She sidesteps quickly when Kai and his human roll by.

"I know you mean well, really I do," Serena chastises Arista. "But from now on before you make any decisions—and I mean *any*—you must seek my approval first."

"I explained my intent to the Ungainlies," argues Arista. "They agreed to give me blood samples so I could test for compatibility before I injected anything into them."

Serena shakes her head, ushering Arista back to the woods. "I don't think those were the kind of samples they were intending to give."

A dueling pair slams into the ground in front of the maidens. They jump back, Arista squealing. Kai is on top, and the human beneath him has hit his head against the pavement. Blood splatters across the blacktop.

Arista reaches out toward a small pool of the thick, red liquid. "Could we just—"

"Absolutely not!" Serena pulls her away.

Despite the loss of blood, the human has plenty of fight left within him. He kicks Kai off, then lunges, catching Kai in his midsection with a hard shoulder. Both Kai and Liam have their hands full, but they won't abandon the maidens. Serena needs to get Arista safely away before they can bow out of the fight.

Still ushering Arista, Serena is almost at the tree line. The forest leans forward, ready to welcome them into its dark embrace.

But someone steps in their way, casting an even darker shadow over the pair of maidens.

It is Arista's original suitor, and he isn't giving her up so easily.

"You're with me." He sneers, reaching out for her other arm.

Serena yanks back, pulling Arista out of his reach. His swipe hits nothing but air, and he stumbles forward. Stepping in front of Arista, Serena uses his momentum and pushes down on his head. Keeping one of her webbed feet solid and strong in front of his boots, she manages to trip him. He falls hard, slamming into the pavement.

Groaning, he attempts to push himself up. He reeks of alcohol and blood, his clothes are disheveled and half falling off from the fight, and he looks as if it might be another few days before he is able to get himself off the ground.

Nonetheless, he is making the attempt, and Serena doesn't want to risk anything. She takes off the belt that barely holds his pants up and uses it to tie his hands around his back. In the process, an Ungainly weapon clatters to the ground from his waistline.

Serena picks up the shiny black handgun, checks it for bullets, and raises it above her head.

The shot splits the air and leaves a ringing echo in her ears. A nearby streetlamp shatters, sending a spray of glass across the pavement. The fights before her stop cold.

"What are you—?"

The question is cut off when Serena pulls the trigger again. Ungainlies pull themselves apart from Liam and Kai.

Another man attempts to speak, putting his hands gently in the air. "Listen, little blue miss, we were just having some fun."

She pulls the trigger two more times. She lifts her chin and, out of the corner of her eye, she can see the chamber of the pistol hanging open. There are no more bullets left.

Confidence wavering, Serena lowers the weapon before anyone else can see. "We shall retire for the night," Serena says. "Go back to your party and leave us in peace."

No one moves for several seconds. There are no sounds save for the music coming from the building behind them.

"There's nothing in those woods for you." One of the Ungainlies nods to the dark forest behind Serena. "Except trouble."

Liam and Kai have started toward Serena now, keeping a wary eye on the humans as they pass.

"We are accustomed to trouble," says Serena. "And we will not bother you again." Serena makes a pointed look at Arista.

"Let me." Kai takes the weapon from Serena and disassembles the parts, dropping piece by piece as they walk toward the forest.

"When did you learn to do all that?" Arista asks the group as she follows them into the tree line.

"When you were sitting in prison eating sponge worms," says Serena. She lays a hand on Arista's shoulder. "Come on. They aren't going to leave it at that. We need to hurry."

The group starts toward their camp at a light jog, but it isn't long before they can hear someone crashing through the trees behind them. It sounds as if the Ungainly herd has doubled in size. Serena leads the way, dragging Arista behind her. They duck under branches, plough through shrubbery, and hop over bushes. Scratches form across Serena's legs and arms but she doesn't want to bring her armor forward for fear it would slow her.

Sprinting through a brief clearing, Serena risks a glance back. She can see the first Ungainly on Liam’s heels. In front of her, glowing eyes peer out from the next clump of trees. Smiling to herself, Serena repositions her hand on Arista's arm to get a better grip. She charges straight for a thick, fallen trunk.

"Serena…" Arista manages to squeak out in between heavy breaths.

"Duck!" yells Serena.

They both slide under the tree followed closely by Kai and Liam. Feet slipping on loose soil, Serena looks up to see the hairy underbelly of a werewolf leaping over the fallen tree. A chorus of growls tell her several more follow. Serena leads her group behind a bush and they stop to catch their breath, peering through a screen of leaves.

The werewolves stand their ground in the clearing, forming a line so the Ungainlies can go no further.

"Hold!" The first human raises his arms until his friends skitter to a stop. After at least ten of them crowd the clearing, one more man lopes up from behind. Serena recognizes him as the one she tied up. He whips the belt in the air above his head like a lasso. After peeking around his friends, his arm drops and the belt goes limp in his hands.

"Stand together!" the one in front tries to direct his friends. "They won't attack something that looks bigger than them."

"That's bears, not wolves," a comrade whispers through gritted teeth.

"It applies to all animals, dummy."

In response, one of the wolves pulls back his lips in a snarl and lets loose a round of vicious growling and snapping. The men lose their nerve, turn tail, and run.

Rising from their hiding spot, Liam, Kai, and the two maidens brush themselves off, nodding their thanks to the wolves.

"Better pack up camp." Liam gestures to the sky. It begins to lighten as dawn approaches. "We have one more day of sailing ahead of us."

Chapter Forty-Two

Once they return to camp, it is a mad rush to pack up and board the boats before Ungainly authorities decide to investigate a wolf pack too close to an Ungainly city. Back on board the tugboat, Serena double checks the sailing route with the navigator. It will be an easy day—only a couple of hours until they reached the finish line: Juneau, Alaska.

They cast off and take it slow, Serena keeping watch until she spots the other racers coming up behind them, the three other ships from her fleet included. Serena breathes a sigh of relief. The ships are whole and have run up the green flag. All is well.

With Ungainlies approaching quickly, all of the Undine and most of the wolves disappear below deck. Serena goes with them. She pauses at the bottom of the ladder well, searching the dimly lit room until her eyes lock onto Simone's bright red scales.

Weaving her way through bodies packed into the hull of the ship, Serena finds the sick area.

"It is at least considerably less," she murmurs to Simone.

"Yes," says Simone, straightening to wipe her forehead with the back of her hand. "But for those that are still here… " She trails off, as if a lump forming in her throat makes it impossible for her to speak further.

Serena understands—their chances aren't good.

Taking a deep breath, Serena turns to look at the sick maidens. There are three of them, one is pinkish-purple Kiera, her damp blonde tresses curled and sticking to a reddened face—the result of a fever sustained far too long.

Simone slumps down beside Kiera.

"Can you help them?" asks Serena.

"I have," says Simone. "I've done everything I did for you and more. But they are showing no signs of improvement. They just keep getting worse." Simone dabs at Kiera's forehead with a cool, wet rag. "They need to be in their natural form in healing waters. It is the only other thing that I can think of that will help."

"How quickly?" asks Serena.

Simone looks at Serena with a steady gaze. "Within 24 hours."

Mouth dropping open, Serena holds out empty hands as if she has nothing to offer. "We have at least three more weeks of sailing ahead of us!"

Lips tight, Simone doesn't acknowledge Serena. She only picks up the rag, and dabs at Kiera's forehead again.

"Excuse me." A pack member practically shoves Serena aside. "I have more cold water, and here is the axe you asked for, Simone."

"Axe?" Serena exclaims.

The queen is ignored.

"Use it on these." Simone hands the pack member a small, wooden bowl and a vial of herbs.

Without question, he sits down and grinds at the herbs with the handle of the axe. A flowery, soothing scent fills the air.

"He hasn't left her side," Simone says to Serena. "So I had to put him to good use."

"End of the line!" shouts on the deck ring below. The finish line to the race is in sight, but it gives Serena no sense of glory or accomplishment. Their race against the clock starts now, and this time, everyone might not survive.

Fishing through her bag, Serena pulls out her hooded sweatshirt and slips it on. She makes her way above deck, pulling the material low over her head. Cheers ring out from a distance. Following the sound, Serena watches as the Juneau port comes into view. The piers are crowded with people waving. Sitting amongst the crowd is a white judges' tent—a tall trophy sits inside, its gold beaming out.

"What is that flashing?" Serena asks, coming to stand next to Liam and Kai at the railing.

"They are taking pictures," says Liam. "Smile."

"Oh," Serena turns her back, pulling her hood down even further. "What now?"

"We will need to check in for the final leg," says Kai. "Then there are awards and acknowledgements—"

"Why do we need to stay for all that?" Serena asks, frowning.

"We need to stay at least long enough so as not to appear suspicious," says Liam, leaning out on the rail. "It'd also be good to find out what came from last night, and if the authorities are looking for anyone. Why? In a hurry?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." Serena crosses her arms. "There are three sick maidens, and they don't have much time left. We need to get them to healthy waters, and we need to do it by tomorrow."

There is no response from Kai and Liam. They stand still, processing the information until Ungainlies on the ports are in front of them. Imitating sailors on the other ships, Kai and Liam raise their hands to wave. The motion is purely mechanical. Serena knows they are racking their brains for solutions.

Even going over land wouldn't be quick enough. Kiera and the other two maidens are out of time.

We need a miracle, Poseidon. Serena glances over her shoulder at some of the other boats coming in.

We need speed. Serena looks at limp sails. Yesterday's storm took all of the wind with it.

We need wings. A pair of bald eagles fly overhead.

We need…"Bush pilots," she says out loud. Her eyes are back on the boats. One, in particular, that holds an Ungainly she recognizes.

"What?" Kai and Liam ask simultaneously as they turn around, looking to where Serena points.

"Bush pilots," she repeats.

Understanding dawns on their faces.

"We'll need to do a whole lot of convincing," says Liam.

"We can find some way to pay him," says Kai.

Liam nods. "I know we can. I was talking about the rest of us."

"No convincing needed," says Serena.

They both look at her, skepticism scrunching up their faces.

"I am the queen," says Serena.

Now Liam raises an eyebrow.

"Well, I am," she mumbles.

"I'll go get some form of payment," says Liam.

"And I'll go talk to the pilots," says Kai.

"And I'll go… be a queen," offers Serena.

As the tugboat pulls into port, Serena disappears back below deck. Despite the loud cheers, music, and clapping from the pier, the mood below is somber. Kiera has taken a turn for the worse, and everyone sits quietly.

Previously prepared to issue a decree worthy of a full Assembly, Serena changes her mind. She moves through the crowded room quickly, whispering to those closest to her so as not to distract the healers from doing their jobs. "We will be traveling by plane to our destination. Bring only that which you can carry with you. Everything else will have to stay here."

There is no hesitation and no refusal by anyone to the new form of travel. The urgency at which the healers work speaks to the need.

Serena continues moving through the room. As she skirts around a group of mixed maidens and werewolves holding hands with heads bent together, she realizes there are no more lines of division. Instead of the maidens huddled together on one side, with the werewolves lined up on the other, they are all interspersed. They are encouraging each other, they are helping each other, and beyond that, they care for each other.

Her sense of pride is dashed as a flurry of activity near the sick bay draws Serena's attention. Victory comes at a steep price.

Chapter Forty-Three

As soon as Serena receives word that Kai and Liam have returned, she races above deck and out on the pier to meet them. She is taking a chance, but the crowds have dispersed for the most part and Simone has already had to resuscitate Kiera once. Every second counts.

"Did you make arrangements?" Serena asks.

"We have a ride if we can find payment," says Kai.

Liam nods. "I thought we could sell the boats, but no one wants them. I'm not even sure I could give them away with such short notice."

"Sir! Excuse me, sir?"

An Ungainly is racing down the pier toward Liam and Serena.

"Uh-oh," Serena pulls her hood further down her forehead. Behind her, two more Ungainlies are unloading a large pallet of supplies. She is trapped. "Just get rid of him quickly," she whispers to her brother.

Kai edges closer to Serena and takes her hand. Her quickening heartbeat evens out, and she takes a deep breath, putting most of herself behind Kai and Liam, stealing small glances of the approaching Ungainly in between them.

He jogs the rest of the way to the group. He is a heavy man and already breathing hard with the exertion.

"Congratulations," Liam says as they wait for him to catch his breath.

The man glances at the trophy he carries in one arm. It is a huge cup mounted on driftwood. A small plaque nailed to the wood reads, 'First Place, Capital to Capital Predicted Log Yachting Race'.

"Thank you—though after the events of the race, I could care less about winning any trophy. You see, my son was on one of those ships that broke apart during the storm. I let him travel with his uncle, my brother. Damn fool thought he could get out ahead of the weather. They left before I could stop them." His voice catches in his throat. He shakes his head as if warding away thoughts of what could've been.

Vaguely, Serena recalls a teenage boy she pulled from the depths of the sound during the storm.

"I know your ship pulled him out of the water, and I wanted to thank you." He shifts the trophy to the other arm and holds out his hand.

Narrowing his eyes, Liam scrutinizes the human. The human lifts his eyebrows, glistening blue eyes looking harmless enough. Kai elbows Liam.

"Oh, right." Liam shakes the human's hand. "Weren't nothin'."

"Nothing?" The man scoffs. "It was my son's life—he means everything to me. This" —he holds up the trophy— "is nothing. Thank you for saving my son."

"You are most welcome," Kai offers, his sense of manners exceeding what Liam can give.

The man nods once to Kai. "Anyway, I heard as how you were looking to sell your ships."

"You interested?" asks Liam.

Serena has a brief moment of elation, until the man speaks again.

"No," he says. "But I gather you're in need of some money." He looks at the trophy again, a tiny flicker of regret flashing across his face, then he shoves the award into Liam's arms.

Liam takes a step back, looking down at the trophy in his hands. "Heavy," he comments.

"Pure gold," says the human. "I imagine you can get a pretty penny for it."

"You…" Liam's eyes go wide. "You're giving this to us?"

"Like I said, don't mean nothing compared to what you did for me. I only wish I could give you more."

The group goes quiet, staring at one another in awkward silence. Finally, the human gives a nervous laugh. "My son said something about angels in the water. Swears he saw something out there…" he trails off, shaking his head. "Proves more than anything how close to death he really came." His voice cracks again.

Liam lays a heavy hand on the human's shoulder, snapping the man out of it. "Best not to dwell on it," he says, half turning the man back down the pier.

Before Liam can steer him away, Serena steps in front of them in a bold move. The Undine have already been exposed, and she has to know how these Ungainlies will react. She is counting on the fact that he is obviously not as heartless a creature as those in the parking lot in Juneau.

Against all instincts screaming at her not to, Serena reaches up and pulls back her hood. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Liam's mouth

drop open and his hand starts to rise, as if he is going to put the hood right back on her.

She gives him a hard look and his hand freezes mid-air. Satisfied he won't interfere, she returns her gaze to the man before her.

His eyes examine her face, everything from her angled, sharp chin to her blue-tinted cheekbones. Expression neutral, he finally meets her eyes and does not waver from there as he speaks. "You know what?"

Serena waits, holding her breath and lifting her chin slightly, clinging to her own confidence.

"I do believe my son was right… 'bout them angels in the water."

Chapter Forty-Four

The old cargo plane is a patchwork of metal squares held together by rusty nails. One faded stripe runs along its side. Serena squints, trying to make out the foreign lettering.

"Russian," says Liam, crossing his arms to stare at the plane alongside her.

"Oh," says Serena. She knows little to nothing about Russians or their machinery. "What does that mean? Will it be safe?"

"It means we'll get there—but it ain't goin' to be pretty." Liam glances behind them. Several werewolves are transporting sick maidens in sheets. The healers walk alongside them, holding the limp wrists of their patients to keep apprised of their pulses. "Come on," says Liam. "The sooner we get to Ivvavvik, the better."

Liam is the first to climb the steep stairwell to the plane, and Serena stays tight on his heels. The whole thing sways as they pull themselves up each step. Serena swears even the flight can't be as dangerous as the stairwell.

Once they enter the plane, Liam hands the trophy to the pilot.

"As agreed," he says.

The pilot inspects the trophy, rubbing the back of his hand under his nose. "You ain't trying to trick us with no fake, are ya?"

Crossing his arms, Liam stares at the pilot from under bushy eyebrows. "Just get us there—
whole. And don't say nothin' about who or what you see that is about to board this plane."

"That there's my job, ace." He passes the trophy over to his co-pilot, then salutes Liam. They both disappear into the cockpit to prepare for takeoff. Amidst all the button-pushing and switch-flicking, they are making jokes and passing a flask back and forth, taking swigs of a liquid that Serena can smell from where she stands.

She crinkles her nose. "What are they drinking?"

Lifting one side of his lips up in a devious smile, Liam looks down at her. "Smells like moonshine."

Having just boarded, Kai pauses to follow their gazes into the cockpit.

"I dislike it," says Serena.

"Now I have to think of another pet name." Kai rolls his eyes and sits down on a bench running on the inside of the cargo walls shaking his head. "It was such a good one, too."

Liam and Serena move aside to allow maidens and wolves to board and find a seat. Conner and Xavier carry the trunk of tridents to tie down on the floor of the plane. Zeke is helping Doug hop to his seat on one foot. Darcy and Colin keep a tight grip on their boys as all three have different ideas about where they want to sit for the ride.

"Buckle up back there!" the co-pilot shouts over his shoulder as they engines sputter to life.

Subtle shifting down the rows of benches cause a commotion until Kai yells back, "There *are* no buckles!"

Both pilots feign a look of surprise, then let out a bout of maniacal laughter. Exchanging an exasperated glance, Serena and Liam hurry the rest of the maidens and wolves on board, giving false assurances despite the prankster pilots.

The wheels begin to roll even before everyone is seated, and when the aircraft is at its top ground speed, Serena still has her head out the door checking to see if they've left anyone behind. Several alarming bumps later, Kai pulls Serena in and helps Liam figure out how to seal the door.

Settling into the bench, Serena peers out the window. The ride becomes smooth as the aircraft rises into the air, and Serena sees the tops of the five ships they left behind. Liam made arrangements for an agent to watch over them and sell them if he can, splitting the difference in half, leaving Danny's address for his share of the money.

The plane tilts its nose up, causing everyone to hold on to the person next to them. The sick maidens, the healers, and Colin and Darcy and their boys are all on the floor in the middle of the plane. Wolves and maidens close by reach out to help secure them in place. Arms link together down the line creating a tight-knit web of intertwined limbs, scales and furry hides against one another.

Serena releases her grip on the maiden next her once the plane evens out. She swallows to relieve the pressure in her ears, then turns to Kai. It is too loud to speak to one another, but his furrowed eyebrows tell her he is worried. He rubs the pad of his thumb over her bare arm. The skin there is flaking and dry.

Attempting to calm his thoughts, she lays her hand over his and buries her head in his chest. The public intimacy would be unheard of just days ago, but maidens and wolves who have no romantic tendencies toward each other are doing the same. Sometimes the simple, solid warmth of another is enough to keep monsters at bay, even for the monsters themselves.

* * *

Waking with a jolt, Serena rubs her eyes.

"We are descending." Kai leans in close so she can hear. "We are almost there."

The flight was supposed to be short—only a few hours—but she must have managed to doze off. Fully alert now, Serena presses both palms and her nose against the window. All she can see is grayish-white. She fights back a moment of nausea as she realizes the clouds are underneath her. Adjusting in her seat, she moves her face up the window so she can see at a better angle looking down. Suddenly the clouds break and a glassy-blue ocean spreads out before them. Everyone on Serena's side of the plane gasps in awe. Ripples of pristine water roll across the expanse of the Beaufort Sea, tendrils of white froth accenting the blue.

Serena feels a ripple just under her skin. Squeezing her hands into fists, she fights back the urge to release her scales, form her tail, and jump out of the plane just to dive in.

"The forest," says Liam.

"What about it?" Serena asks, shifting her gaze to the land mass neighboring the sea.

"There isn't one.” He frowns.

Darcy steps up to the window by Liam. "There are thicker trees further inland," she lays a hand on his shoulder. "But… the idea here is that we won't need to hide in the forest anymore."

Serena smiles at Darcy's use of the word 'we'.

"Here we are," announces one of the pilots from the cockpit.

"Set us down there." Liam points out the window. "As close as you can to that peninsula."

"Right." The pilots glance at each other. "We're gonna need our payment first."

Confusion tugs Liam's eyebrows together. "I gave you the trophy."

"Eh?" The pilot brings his hand to his ear as if he suddenly can't hear.

Liam stands and stomps toward the cockpit. "I already paid you!" he yells over the roar of the engine.

"Oh, right." The pilot nods. He half turns in his seat to face Liam. "That covered takeoff and the flight. We're going to need payment for the landing before we set her down." Both men look at each other and chuckle. "And the bigger the payment, the softer the landing."

Serena knows what is coming, but before she can even stand from the bench, Liam lunges for the pilot. Huge, hairy hands wrap around a fat, red neck.

The entire plane gives a violent tilt to the left. Maidens and wolves from one side slam into those across from them. Serena fights her way free of heavy bodies. Despite the pilot's refusal to land, the plane makes a series of stomach-flipping drops. With each one, Serena chokes back fear and nausea, imagining they will slam into the ground any minute.

Spotting the chest that holds their tridents tied down at the back of the plane, Serena moves more quickly. A glance over her shoulder reveals Liam in a full blown wrestling match with the pilot. Her brother has yanked the man out of his seat and is now slamming him repeatedly into the dash. Instruments light up with every thunk.

The co-pilot attempts to fly the plane himself, working around the pair of wrestlers. Beads of sweat slide down his face, but every time there is another thunk, he lets out a bout of maniacal laughter.

"Poseidon damn me if I've led them all the way here just to die at the hands of these crazy… Russians," Serena mumbles, refusing to even grace them with the name of Ungainly. Flipping open the lid to the trunk, Serena reaches in, her hand wrapping around cold, familiar metal.

Pulling her arm out, she runs the pad of her thumb over her mark etched into the stem of the trident. Moon Shadow—a double circle representing the full moon and the shadow it casts upon the ocean.

One last favor, Dagon.

Serena turns and yells, "Everyone down!"

Fortunately, the maidens know their Queen's command voice. The wolves are a bit slower, but they are quickly pulled down by maidens. The last head is shoved aside just as Serena releases her trident.

The elongated center prong narrows in on its mark, with the two outer prongs spinning around it. At the front of the plane, Liam cocks his ear. Even above the roar of the engines, Liam knows the sound of a trident slicing through the air.

He holds his man by the scruff of the neck, pushing him into the direct path of the trident.

Serena's eyes widen in horror, and Liam's own words run through her head. *Since we left our home, no one has died*. The trident is almost to the cockpit and Liam still hesitates.

Don't do it.

At the last second Liam pulls. As the trident rotates past, one of the prongs scrape the man's cheek, drawing blood. Prongs slam into the instrument console spitting out a spray of sparks.

Every head turns to look at Serena.

"There is your payment," she says, chest heaving and eyes full of red. "Now set us down before we rip this Russian beast apart."

Slowly, and with a wary eye on Liam, the pilot sits down in his seat. This time there is no laughter and no drink passed back and forth. They bend their heads in concentration, working around the obstacle the trident presents, making do without the systems that have been damaged.

The aircraft makes a wide turn, then straightens out coming around for a long strip of clear beach.

Chapter Forty-Five

Late morning fog rolls across the beach. Two snow-white caribou pause in their grazing, ears perking at the sound of engines overhead. But the alien noise cuts off abruptly, and the caribou go back to nosing through sand, searching for sparse grass blades. The gentle arctic sea laps at their hooves as they amble along.

The bull sees movement in the fog, and he turns, putting his fuzzy antlers on full display. A wavering dark shadow forms, and the bull decides it is not worthy investigating. He gives a short grunt, urging his female out of the way, and they both lope along to the next beach.

Cautiously, the shadow moves forward onto the shoreline.

A lone pack member steps into the sun. Stumbling with exhaustion, he catches himself before he loses the precious load he carries in his arms—an unconscious maiden, pinkish-purple scales glittering in the sunlight. Her blonde hair hangs loose and messy, swaying in rhythm to his walk, swaying in rhythm to the waves reaching out, calling to wolf and Undine alike.

His eyes lock onto the water. A few more agonizing steps and finally frothy white hits his boots. Sinking to his knees, the next wave rushes in. He lowers his arms, relinquishing the maiden to healing water. It scours over her, scrubbing scales and skin in a cleansing rinse. Her body's natural response takes over. More scales emerge and legs meld together to form a tail. Ribbed gills behind her ears burst open to catch the surge of salt water.

The wolf releases her completely, allowing the wave to take her with it as it retreats. He holds his breath, waiting and watching, refusing to feel the relief that threatens to flood his system.

More shadows emerge from the fog. Their silence is respectful as they wait with him.

Further out in calmer waters, there is a disturbance. All eyes are pinned on the spot. There is more movement, however subtle. The surface breaks, the sound of it whispering across the beach.

The next wave builds, and the wolf smiles. He can hear the song of the maiden before she even surfaces. As the wave crashes on the shore, he

pushes himself to his feet, catching a glimpse of a finned tail, arching up and out of the water.

All is well. They are home.

Epilogue

"Hello?" The voice crackles with static, and it sounds distant, like it comes to Serena through a long tube.

But Serena would recognize that voice in any form. Her eyes are already glistening with tears. "Mariam?"

"I do not believe my ears…" the voice trails off and there is a clunk, like the satellite phone on the other end has been dropped.

"Mariam? Mariam?" Serena practically yells into her handset through a series of fumbling, clicks and exclamations on the other end.

"Serena, dear, did you make it? Are you in trouble?" asks Mariam.

"No, no," Serena answers. "We made it. We are all well and here at Ivvavik. What about you? Is everyone okay?"

There is a brief silence before Mariam speaks again. "Two of the elders have passed into the afterlife."

Serena shakes her head. "We have a way to bring you here, by plane. Before anyone else—"

"Serena… we've made our decision. No one has changed their mind. Now, no more talk of that. What is it like there?"

Maidens have gathered in a large circle around Serena, and they've started shouting.

"Tell Hailey I resuscitated a wolf." Simone leans forward, talking into the handset herself.

"Shh." Serena waves Simone away.

"Ronan and Rayne send their love," says Mariam. "And Murphy wants to know if you still have your trident."

Serena's laugh turns into a sob. "Tell him no—I don't. But it served its purpose. It got us here."

Mariam laughs in response. "I'll let him know."

"Listen, we don't have much time," says Serena. "I don't want to risk being tracked, but we'll figure out a routine where we can make calls regularly. Others want to talk, too, so I'll pass the phone on now."

"Okay, Serena. We are so proud of you, and we send our blessings. Be careful."

"Always am." Serena is barely able to complete their old exchange without choking on it. She passes the phone on to the group of maidens who immediately begin arguing over it.

Stepping away, Serena wipes her cheeks with the heel of her hand. She ascends a bank of large boulders into one of many caves carved into the shoreline.

The sharp smell of boiling hydrocoral drifts out. Arista looks up from her grinding stone when Serena enters. Darcy stokes a smoldering fire.

"The potion is coming along?" asks Serena.

"We hope so," says Darcy. She stands, wiping her hands across an apron she wears. "As long as we can find a way to cultivate the anti-venom in sharks."

"It'll be tricky," says Serena. "But it was either the sharks or humans." She narrows her eyes at Arista. "And the latter is harder to come by in these parts."

"Well, I'm off," says Darcy. "I have to get dinner started. Colin has the boys out hunting nearly every day, and they are always starving by the time they get back."

Months ago, after their arrival at Ivvavik, one of the first projects was to build a temporary home for Colin's family. The rest of the pack are making themselves comfortable in the caves on the beach, and the Painted Maidens have all found homes in The Deep.

The entire group decided to wait until they were settled and the sick maidens were recovered before they called home.

"We'll see you tomorrow?" asks Arista.

"As you say." Darcy gives a curtsey, causing Arista to giggle.

Darcy turns and waves to Serena, then exits the cave, making her way carefully over the rocks.

When Serena turns back to Arista, the woman is bent over the grinding stone again.

"Has her majesty come for a reading?" Arista raises a curious eyebrow.

"Are you able to see now that you have your hydrocoral?" Serena asks.

"Some paths are clearer than others." Arista shrugs. "Is there something in particular you wish to know?"

Sitting down on a hard rock across from Arista, Serena waits until the Undine psychic is finished turning the batch of hydrocoral in front of her

to powder. Arista carefully pushes the small pile into a tube, corks it, then looks up at Serena.

"When I was sick during The Migration, in the midst of my fevers, I had a dream."

"A dream?" Arista interrupts. "Or a vision?"

"I don't know…" Serena shifts on her rock. "But I believe I was on the verge of death, until I was told I had yet to fulfill my purpose." Now Serena shrugs. "And then I came back."

Arista nods, quiet as she stares into the fire. Noise from maidens flocking around the phone on the beach filters in. Finally, Arista turns to look at Serena. "I have foreseen something that could certainly be interpreted as your purpose."

"Well?" Serena puts her hand to her heart—it is beating so hard it feels as if it might burst from her chest.

Slowly, Arista leans over. "Not there," she says as she takes Serena's wrist, moving the queen's hand until it rests over her stomach. "There."

Serena's eyes go wide as she looks down. "A child…"

"No," says Arista. "A single blessing is reserved for Liam and Sophia." She gestures out onto the beach where Sophia's bright orange scales stand apart from the rest of the maidens. She walks along the tide line, hand in hand with Liam. "Theirs will be named for Sasha, our lost maiden."

Serena smiles, a bloom of warmth spreading in her chest that wards away the cold of the cave.

"Her majesty," continues Arista, "will take after her mother."

"Twins," says Serena, her voice hollow. "A boy and a girl?"

Arista nods. "They grow already."

Serena looks down again, her fingers spreading wide over her stomach. Suddenly, she looks up, spotting the hydrocoral. "The anti-venom—"

"Will be ready," interrupts Arista. "Why do you think I've been working so hard?"

Serena nods, biting her lip for the first time in a long time. In a burst of emotion, she throws her arms around Arista, burying her head in the psychics braid. "I'm so glad you're not still in chains."

Arista laughs the high-pitch, annoying laugh that Serena now finds endearing. "Me as well, your majesty."

"So they will both be born healthy? What will we name them? Will there be more after the twins?"

Putting both hands in the air, Arista puts a polite stop to Serena's questions. "I'm sorry, your majesty. But the first thing Isadora taught me was to never reveal too much." Arista leans closer to Serena and winks. "Takes the magic out of it."

"Out of what?" asks Serena.

Arista makes a wide circle with her hands. "Life."

Nodding, Serena swallows her next hundred questions with an audible gulp. She puts her hand to her stomach again, focusing on the here and now. "Oh," says Serena. She digs into the dry bag at her hip and pulls out a large book. "Since none of the caves in The Deep here escape high tide, I thought we could leave this with you."

"The Ancestral Book," says Arista, eyes wide. She runs her hand gently over the cover. "I didn't realize Mariam gave it to you."

"She believed it was ours for the taking." Serena smiles, placing her hand over Arista's. "So we can add to it."

Arista nods, then hugs the book to her chest. "I will watch over it, your majesty."

"I would be much obliged, Arista." Serena rises and turns to leaves. "Oh, and Arista?"

"Hmm?" the Undine psychic murmurs, unable to tear her eyes from the book she holds.

"We'll be holding elections for a new council tomorrow. As Isadora's former understudy, I plan on nominating you."

Arista finally glances up. "Are you sure? Society… doesn't really like me."

"I think they'll come around," says Serena. "Besides, having you on the council will give Assembly a bit more… " Serena makes a wide circle with her hands. "Life."

Before Arista can protest further, Serena says her goodbyes making a promise she will return tomorrow with more questions about her twins. She exits the cave, spotting Kai on one end of the beach. He stares up into the sky, following the white contrail of an airplane from east to west.

"Can they see us?" Serena asks.

Kai brings his gaze back to earth and smiles. "No, too high up." He wraps his arms around Serena. "Though I've been talking to Liam. There are other things out there that can see us. Satellites, I think he said. We should consider only coming onto the beaches at night."

"Is that an official order from The Head of the Guard?" asks Serena.

He straightens, clearing his throat and rotating his trident in a full circle once with his free hand. "My first decree."

Serena laughs. "As you say."

He spins the trident again then brings it to his side, looking at Serena. "Do you miss your trident?"

She buries her head in his chest, looking out at the sea as he squeezes her tighter. "No," she says. "I have no use for Dagon here. It felt… appropriate as final payment for our passage to the birthing grounds."

"I wish you'd stop calling Ivvavik ‘the birthing grounds’. It sounds so feminine."

Serena smiles to herself. *There is a reason for everything,* she thinks. But for now, she keeps Arista's news to herself. There will be time for an announcement to Kai. There will be time now for a lot of things.

"Will you ever tire of kissing me?" Serena asks.

Knitting his eyebrows together, Kai lifts her chin with the crook of his finger, searching her eyes. "Serena," he begins then pauses, perhaps searching for the right words. He twirls the small mermaid charm that dangles from her neck around his finger.

Above them, the clouds have finally broken and snow falls, dusting the pair of them with white flurries.

Eyes lighting up, Kai looks at her again. "Serena, every kiss with you is as unique as a snowflake."

He leans in, touching his lips to hers. It is a sweet, lingering kiss, and before it's done she can feel his lips curving in a smile.

"I think I just found a new pet name for you," he murmurs.

Her eyes widen. "No."

"Come here, snowflake," he growls. "Give us a smooch."

"The name makes no sense!" she laughs, pushing him away.

He bends, scooping her up in his arms, teasing and snarling at her as he walks into the ocean.

Serena's laughter skips across the water one more time before they disappear beneath the surface, heading to the dark embrace of The Deep.

How I Met Your Mother

A Colin and Darcy Short Story

Chapter One

"How about this one?" I point to a generic, dilapidated sign that reads 'Bowling Alley and Bar'.

"I don't care which one. Just pull over—I have to pee."

I roll my eyes at Sarah. In our dorm room she isn't nearly so high maintenance. But then again our dorm has an attached bathroom.

I pull my dad's Pontiac into a gravel parking lot of a bowling alley and turn the key. The engine sputters and dies out. There aren't very many vehicles in the parking lot so hopefully the place is dead and we can be in and out before attracting much attention.

"Sarah—wait!" I struggle with the seatbelt. The latch is stuck again and I have to bang on it with my fist before I am free of its grasp.

"Not waiting, Darcy. Gotta pee." She is taking short but quick steps toward the black doors of the building, gravel skittering out from her thin-soled shoes.

Racing to catch up with her, I yank on her arm. "This is just a quick stop—right? We should've already made it to camp and well into lantern learning by now."

"Right," she says, pulling me along. "But if adventure happens to present itself along the way, I'm not turning in the other direction."

"I knew it. You just needed a car to get you off campus—is lantern learning even a real thing?"

She looks at me with a crooked smile. "I have no idea."

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I pull my purse string so it crosses my body, making sure the money pouch is zipped. Deep into my pocket I feel the mace my dad gave me when I first left for college. I am now almost finished with graduate school and my dad was buried three years ago. The mace is more of a memento, reminding me of the Chief of Police that he was. Right now, the mace serves double duty, giving me the confidence to follow Sarah.

She pushes through the black doors, grunting to fight against rusty hinges.

The smell of smoke, alcohol, and greasy food envelops us. Stopping in our tracks, we let our eyes adjust to the light. I scan the customers and the workers—there isn't a single female in sight. And it seems like every single man is twice the size of the boys we're used to on campus, wearing flannel shirts, and ready to tear down trees with their bare hands—axes not needed.

"Um…?"

Beside me, Sarah is shifting from foot to foot. At this point, I'm not even sure she is going to make it to the restroom. "Just don't accept any drinks from anyone," she says. "I'll be right back!" She spots the restroom and bolts.

After the door slams shut behind her, I realize maybe I should just go with her.

"The restrooms are for customers only."

My head swings in the direction of the gruff voice. A bartender, just as big as the rest of them, is wiping down the counter with a dirty rag.

I try to make my eyes not so wide, glancing in the direction of the bathroom. "We are customers," I say, taking a seat at the bar.

He throws the rag in a sink behind him. I set my forearms down on the bar in front of me, and immediately pull them back up—sticky.

The bartender narrows his eyes.

"You missed a spot," I say. I couldn't help it.

He smiles. "I know. Keeps the riffraff away." He hands me a wet paper towel.

"Thanks." Focusing my attention on cleaning my skin, I suddenly look up. "Are *we* the riffraff?"

He shrugs and pulls an empty glass from underneath the counter. "Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On what brings you here." He turns around, pulling on a tap.

"Lantern learning," I say.

"What is lantern learning?" he glances over his shoulder, furrowing his eyebrows.

"It's really just a camping trip where we spend time studying, you know—free from distractions of campus life."

"Ah, well. Whatever works I guess." He sets down a beer, foam dripping over the top and running down the side. "On the house," he

smiles. "On account of the stickiness."

I laugh. Even though I am no longer glancing at the bathroom door, Sarah's words of caution about accepting drinks ring in my head. Surely a bartender is trustworthy, right? "Thank you but I can't. I'm allergic to gluten."

"What is gluten?"

"This is…" I gesture to the glass.

"Oh," he takes the glass back, peering suspiciously into the amber liquid. Shrugging, he pulls a large gulp of it himself, easing my fears about his trustworthiness. "Anything else you can have?"

My eyes drift to the shelf of hard liquor behind him.

"You don't mess around, honey."

He is watching my face as he runs his hand down the row of bottles. As he passes over the vodka, the corner of my mouth twitches, giving away my weakness.

"Black Russian?" he asks.

"You know my heart."

Now he laughs. "I figure the coffee liqueur can keep you awake during…what was it…lantern learning, sweetheart."

I try to study my fingernails, but my gaze keeps wandering back to him. Coming from a liberal academic environment, where sexism is so frowned upon I can't remember the last time a guy held the door open for me, I find myself liking Colin's use of diminutives.

"What did you say your name was?" I ask.

"I didn't." He squeezes half a lemon over a shaker. Defined lines along the side of his arms make an appearance when he screws the lid shut and shakes it.

He pours—I drink. Once it is gone, I set the drink down on the counter. "Are you going to make me guess? I'm not good at guessing games."

"The name is Colin," he sticks out a hand.

We shake over an empty glass of whiskey sour. "Nice to meet you, Colin. I'm Darcy."

A door slams shut, and I look toward the bathroom. Sarah stands just outside the women's restroom door, her face pale, her body eerily still.

"What's this?" Another voice booms from the entrance to the bowling alley.

The man that stands there is no lumberjack. Long black hair and icy blue eyes bore into me, then Sarah. Someone has turned down the loud rock music, and no more bowling balls go barreling down the lanes. The entire place goes quiet.

Behind the bar, Colin's back stiffens, watching warily as the man comes closer. "Alaric," Colin greets him with a nod of his head.

Alaric grumbles in return—it almost sounds like a growl.

How rude.

As Alaric passes behind me, chills run down my spine. I glance nervously up at Colin, who shoots me a flash of sympathy. But Alaric moves on, headed for Sarah.

When he stops directly in front of her, I jump up from my seat. Colin's hand shoots across the bar, grabbing my wrist—gentle but firm. He gives me a warning look and shakes his head.

I turn back to Sarah. Alaric is looking her up and down, as if he is judge, jury, and executioner.

"She hasn't done anything wrong!" I hiss at Colin.

"I'll take care of it." He releases my wrist and comes around from behind the bar. "They stopped to use the restrooms—they were just leaving, Alaric."

Alaric continues to stare at Sarah, who manages to swallow hard and nod her head.

"Well," Alaric crosses his arms. "I hope you found the facilities…clean enough."

Slowly, Colin pulls at Sarah's arm, ushering her around Alaric and toward me. Alaric doesn't look back—he slams through the women's restroom door.

"You guys go, just go." Colin gives us both one last nudge then turns and follows Alaric into the bathroom.

"What happened?" I ask Sarah, escorting her from the building. Neither of us look back.

"I don't know," she shakes her head. "I thought I saw something, but…"

"But what?"

"It was probably nothing."

"That was really weird," I say, my thoughts dwelling on Colin and his defined forearms.

"You didn't have any drinks did you?" Sarah asks.

"Wait!" Colin shouts after us. He runs to catch up.

"Let's go—come on." Sarah pulls at my arm but I find myself leaning in Colin's direction.

"Sorry about all that," he says, coming to a stop in front of me. "But you probably shouldn't come back here." A look of regret flashes across his face.

Suddenly, I want nothing more than to see him again. "Come find me. I'm at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver."

"Oh," he scratches the back of his neck, cheeks flushing. "I have a hard time leaving."

I cock my head in confusion.

"Work—that is. It gets busy."

My stomach drops like I've been dumped before we've even been on a date.

His eyes go wide. "No, no, no. Don't take that the wrong way. I mean, I want to see you again."

"You do?" I am so confused right now.

"Give me your number," he says. "I'll take you somewhere close by."

I give him a wary look. As far as I know, there is nothing close by. But curiosity gets the best of me. Swinging my purse around in front of me, I pull out a pen. The best thing I can find to write on is the crumpled napkin from the bar I stuck in my pocket for some reason. "Here," I scribble a few numbers on the napkin and hand it to him.

When he takes the napkin from me, our fingers brush. His are warm compared to the cool night air. "Funny," he says. "It's the first phone number scribbled across a bar napkin I've ever got."

"Says the bartender."

"Yeah," he scrapes the toe of his boot across loose gravel.

A loud honk from my car startles us both. I turn to look—Sarah is giving me an exasperated look from behind the wheel.

"I have to go," I tell Colin. "You'll call?"

He holds up the napkin. "I will," he says.

I give him one last smile and slip into the passenger seat. "I guess you're driving?" I ask Sarah.

"Like my life depends on it," she says.

Chapter Two

"What did you see?" I ask Sarah again.

Color is returning to her face but her hands shake and her lips tremble. "Just, promise me you won't go back there."

"I can't," I say as I rest my hand on her shoulder, trying to be reassuring. "Unless you tell me what you saw. Did someone hurt you?"

"No, no," she says, shaking her head. "Nothing like that." She takes a deep breath, her chest rising then falling again under her light orange jacket. "I was in the bathroom—alone. The stall door doesn't lock so I had to hold it." She pauses, looking at me with wide eyes. "Do you have any cigarettes?"

"I don't smoke, and neither do you. Keep talking."

She turns her attention back to the dark road. "Okay. So I hear the door open, and someone walks in."

I frown. "I didn't notice any other women there."

"This was no woman," she lets out a nervous laugh. "Way too big to be a woman—had huge feet and boots caked in mud. He entered the stall next to mine." Sarah shrugs. "I figured the men's restroom was full, no big deal as long as I can get out of there quick. So just as I'm finishing up, I start to hear these weird noises."

"What kind of noises?"

"Like—bone-crunching noises. And gushy noises."

"Gross," I stick out my tongue.

Her hands squeeze the steering wheel. "Then I saw blood dripping down to the floor."

"What?" My mouth drops open. "Are you sure there was just one person? We should report this. You should've said something back there!"

"I was scared stiff with my back up against the other side of the stall. I watched as the pool of blood crept closer and closer to my feet. Finally, just when it was about to reach me, I ran out." Sarah takes a few deep breaths. "I was going to say something, but that—that guy—that monster that came into the bar. Did you see the way he looked at me? I had a feeling I was going to be next if I said anything at all."

Looming redwood trees fly past the window. Sarah picked up speed as she told her story. At least she is headed back to campus.

"Promise me you won't go back there, Darcy." Sarah says, her voice ringing soft like she is at the other end of a distant phone call. "Promise me you won't have anything to do with them at all."

* * *

A full week has passed since we visited the bowling alley, and Sarah wakes up in a cold sweat twice a night—she usually ends up in bed with me. Enduring her restless sleep and our third roommate's constant comments about lesbianism, combined with finishing midterms of my senior year puts me on edge. By Friday, I need a release.

When Colin sends me a text with a place and time to meet him Saturday morning, I don't hesitate with my response.

U going to tell me what we're doing? I'm not good at guessing games. I text back.

His only short response. *No baggy clothing.*

I pack a bag and I'm out of our room before Sarah wakes up. A note on the dresser lets her know I am at the library all day.

Following his directions back onto Vancouver Island, I sip coffee during the drive trying to forget about the grades on my midterms which I won't get back until next week anyway. Instead, I practice my interrogation, determined to find some sense in what Sarah saw. Hopefully I can get an explanation—one good enough to stop her nightmares.

I pass the deserted bowling alley. The only other sign of civilization this far north on the island is a trailer park. Thankfully, his directions lead me past that, too. Finally, I pull down a narrow gravel path, navigating the unkempt road until it ends in a small clearing that can pass as a three-car parking lot. No other cars are there.

Putting the Pontiac in park, I get out. Standing next to the car, I turn a full circle twice.

"Hello?" I call.

No answer. I slam the door shut, and lean against the car, scrolling through the texts on my phone to make sure I didn't miss a text from Colin, or a phone message that he cancelled.

I sigh loudly, putting the phone back in my pocket.

After a few more minutes of listening to the crickets chirp, I finally ask myself.

What are you doing here?

I don't know this man, at all—except for the fact that he isn't allergic to gluten, he works long hours, and he is sort of nice. And that last one is only compared to a few others in the bar. He really could be a serial killer for all I know.

Heart pumping some sense into my brain (I swear the midterms have fried it), I fumble for my keys. Behind me, a twig snaps in the woods. I turn, startled, and manage to drop my keys.

I realize with a rueful smile that this is slowly turning into a classic horror story.

A bush further into the tree line rustles with movement.

Keeping my eyes trained on the forest, I bend, feeling for my keys. Once my hand closes around the metal ring, I find the longest one and clasp it around one end so the teeth are protruding from my tight fist. Until I find a rock or something, this is the only weapon I have. Dad's mace is tucked away safely in my underwear drawer at home.

A dark shadow takes shape, its details obscured by thick plant life. Although it is a full morning sun, the canopy above doesn't lend enough light. I squint into the forest, my heart pounding in my chest.

The figure grows as it comes closer, until finally it emerges into the clearing with me. I feel no relief once I recognize the shadowy stalker as Colin. Coils of rope are draped across his chest, and in his gloved hands he holds a network of nylon webbing. It looks like a full body harness.

My eyes go wide when he steps forward. "Just…stand back, you creep!" I point the sharpest side of my key at him.

"Darcy—what happened? Are you okay?"

Before I can answer, Colin drops everything on the ground and turns his back to me. He faces the forest, scanning it with his eyes, and…*did he just sniff the air?*

Slowly, he does a full circle around the Pontiac, inching closer and closer to me. I can only see the side of his face when he looks one way or the other. His eyes blaze and his brow is pinched in concentration.

My arm is getting tired from the tension, but before I can lower it, I run a list of all the horrible things that could happen to me in my head.

"Hey," I say, voice squeaking.

Colin turns, looking me up and down with wild eyes. "There is nothing out there."

"Well, no," my eyebrows knit together in confusion and I make a quick attempt to turn them mean. "Except you." I point my key at him. "And my roommate knows exactly where I am and who I am with." Straightening my back, I continue to glare at Colin. "And her father is a cop."

Slowly, Colin relaxes his stance, a small smile lighting his face as he uncurls his fists. "Good," he says, stepping forward.

I raise my key higher.

"And just so you know," he says. "My buddies know exactly where I am and who I am with. So don't get any ideas." He turns and walks to the edge of the clearing to retrieve his dropped contraptions.

"What?" I ask.

He turns, holding everything up, and I can see that they are in fact two body harnesses, one much bigger than the other. "You aren't going to go all fifty shades on me are you?" I ask. "Because I am so not into that. I—didn't even read the third book."

"Fifty…?" he trails off, thinking. "Oh!" Realization dawns on his face, and he breaks into laughter.

Watching him snorting and guffawing, I am starting to feel a little stupid.

He holds up the larger harness to his own body. "Ever been zip lining?"

Chapter Three

"You've done this before?" I ask as we stand on top of the first platform one hundred feet above ground.

"Blindfolded once," he winks at me as he tightens his harness.

"I could not even imagine doing that." Traversing the rickety rope ladder to get here was enough to almost send me back. But as scary as zip lining sounds, I know my body and my mind need this release. With any luck, it will be enough of an adrenaline rush to get me through finals at the end of the year.

I just hope Colin cannot see the white-knuckled grip I have around a branch coming off the sturdy tree that comes up through the center of the platform.

"I'm going to tighten you up, okay?" he asks. "It's a safety precaution—I'm not getting' fresh, just so you know."

I manage a smile. "Got it. Safety."

Closing my eyes, I try to concentrate on the feel of his hands around my waist, tugging at straps until the harness hugs my body.

Around us, the wind picks up and the entire tree we are perched on sways.

"Oh my god." Icy fear grips my chest while my stomach feels as though it has dropped straight out of the tree.

Warm arms wrap around me and Colin presses forward until my back is against the solid trunk. He is forcing me to keep myself together, and I am grateful for it. I breath in his scent—resh soap with an underlying aroma of pine.

"Better?" he whispers close to my ear.

I take a deep breath and nod.

Pulling away a little, he lifts my chin so I am looking into his eyes. "These trees are hundreds of years old, and they've survived much more than a little wind. You will feel them sway, some worse than that, but they won't fall. Okay?"

"Okay," I say, my voice shaky.

The ends of his mouth turn down in a concerning frown, and I can't help but notice the carefully groomed stubble along his chin and cheeks; rugged

and refined at the same time.

"Are you scared of heights?" he asks.

"Isn't everybody?" I give a nervous laugh.

I feel his hands tighten on my shoulders, and I like it.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this." Colin looks back at the rope ladder as if he might call the whole thing off.

"No, no." My response is immediate, surprising even myself. "I mean…" Another nervous laugh—*damn it*. "I'll be fine. I want to do this."

He looks at me for a long few moments and I seriously feel like I am melting under his gaze. Which is good—puddles don't have bones to break.

"Okay," he finally says. "But on each pass, I am going first, which leaves you by yourself. You are going to have to work up the nerve to jump off, all on your own. Can you do that?" He takes another step back, fiddling with his own harness again.

I take a look at the rope that disappears into the mist, and swallow hard. "I told you—I've got this."

"Once I go, I can't come back. I'll need to go through the whole course, then hike up here. So if you aren't joinin' me within five minutes, I'm movin' on."

"Just five minutes? What if I get stuck?"

"Darcy—if you don't go within a minute after I give the all clear, you ain't goin' at all. It's just the way it works. And if you get stuck out on the line, I'll know. I'll come out and tow you in. But I need to go first so I can catch if you are comin' too fast."

Now I am looking back at the rope ladder.

"Just keep your hand here," he lifts my hand to the cable. "And start squeezing when you see me. The glove will protect you from friction burns. Simple."

"Simple," I repeat.

"Now, whatever you do, don't—" Colin takes another step back, and falls off the ledge.

My hand reaches out for him as I watch the tips of his boots disappear from the ledge. "Colin!"

The rope jerks with tension, and Colin reappears, dangling under the rope as he slides along, a series of mechanical devices keeping him safe.

Laughter follows him into the mist. "Just kidding! See you soon!"

I am breathing hard, my hand over my chest. "Jerk!" I manage to shout just before he vanishes. Stepping back to the tree, I wrap my arms around it, rough bark scraping my cheek, and wait.

Several agonizing seconds later, I hear his voice. "All clear!"

Nothing is in fact, clear. Everything is shrouded in a terrifying mist.

Reluctantly, I let go of the tree just as it starts swaying again.

"You have two choices Darcy," I tell myself. "Turn around, get in the Pontiac, hope it starts, go back to the dorm, and get a head start on the next semester." I take a deep breath, lining up my toes with the edge of the platform. "Or, you could just…live. For the first time in your life."

"All clear!" he shouts again.

"Hold your horses!" I shout back.

I can't be sure, but I think I hear him laughing again.

I check my hand placement on the rope above me, and look to make sure my harness is still buckled, well aware the five minute deadline is ticking steadily closer.

Lifting one foot, I keep my eyes pinned to the far end of the rope, and before I can convince myself not to, I step forward. The platform falls away from me and suddenly I am rushing forward, wind ripping at my clothes and face. Treetops brush the bottom of my feet and somewhere in that rush of emotion I think this has to be the closest thing to an out-of-body experience I have ever had.

The mist melts away, revealing the rest of the rope with Colin standing at the end of it, keeping an intense watch.

"Whoa!" he shouts when he sees me.

Suddenly I am sure I am going way too fast and I squeeze my hand around the rope. The look of concern Colin gives me only causes me to panic further. I squeeze harder, crushing the rope as if my life depends on it, and close my eyes. I don't want to see my own death coming.

The impact I brace for never comes. My forward momentum comes to slow stop, and I open my eyes. My feet still dangle over open air, and the platform sits about ten feet in front of me.

Colin clears his throat. "Hold on right there—I'll come and get you."

My face is white, I am sure of it, because my whole body runs icy cold. I am dangling one hundred feet in the air like bait while I wait for Colin to save me. And he is taking his time about it.

The rope sags further when he adds his weight to it and I emit a helpless squeak. Thankfully, he ignores it. He is slow but at least efficient. In time he has made his way to me, pulling himself along hand over hand. He ties one end of a rope to my harness and one end to his, connecting us together. He turns to face me, placing one hand over my own so they are both resting on top of the rope.

"You can let go now—I have you, sweetheart."

Those words send a new kind of rush through my body. It has got to be the sexiest thing anybody has ever said to me.

I release the rope.

Though Colin's face is hardened in concentration, I watch his eyes soften when I relinquish control to him. He turns and starts pulling us both toward the next tree. There is nothing to do but hang there, watching as veins and muscles in his forearms pulse with extra exertion.

He pulls himself up onto the platform, then reaches for me.

Embarrassed, still scared out of my mind, angry at him for joking around, and sure that I am falling for him, by the time my feet hit the second platform of the zip line course I am flushed with emotion. "Whoever thought zip lining was a good idea anyway?" I don't bother hiding the sarcasm from my voice.

"Biologists," Colin says, untying the rope from both our harnesses.

"What?"

"Well, they weren't the first to use them, but wildlife biologists did popularize them. They needed a way to be unobtrusive while studying dense forest canopies."

I shake my head, mumbling. "Damn those thrill-seeking biologist bastards." I take my gloves off and throw them on the platform to wipe the sweat from the palms of my hands.

Colin pauses, eyes wide. Then his face breaks open in a smile as he laughs.

"I…um," I stutter, emitting a little laugh of my own. "I'm sorry. I don't usually curse this much."

"Trust me, these trees have heard more than their fair share of curses, and so have I. But you are doing great. The hard part is over. It is downhill from here." He bends to pick up my gloves. "Uh oh," he says.

I tense, waiting for another petrifying prank. "What?"

"These have a hole." He holds up the gloves for me to see, and sure enough, on the side of one hand there is a small hole. "Here, take mine."

He takes off his and hands them over while he puts the damaged pair on his own hands. "But you might get a friction burn," I say, frowning.

He shakes his head. "I heal quick," he says, winking again.

Both of us properly gloved, he takes my hand, leading me around to the other side of the tree. "This run is a bit longer. Maybe too far for me to shout the all clear. Just count to twenty, slowly, then go."

I press my lips tight together, but nod.

"Ready?" he asks.

Chapter Four

Five platforms later, I am getting the hang of it. Each time I push off a ledge, I don't use my brake until the next platform is coming up on me. I come in too fast every time, but inevitably find myself in Colin's arms as he stops me from plowing into the tree. This scenario is far more preferable to being towed in like a car with a flat tire.

Colin releases me from my latest crash landing. "I'm beginning to think you are doing that on purpose," he says.

I turn away, counting on my loose hair to hide my blush. Skirting around the thick trunk of the tree, anxious to get on with the next run before I say something stupid, I practically topple over a basket.

"What's this?" I ask.

He comes around the tree, kneeling next to the basket. "It's why I was late meeting you. I had to test each of the lines, first, and I left this here for us." Colin pulls out a thin throw blanket, wrapped sandwiches, a large thermos and a bottle of white wine.

"Is this seriously a picnic?" I ask.

He looks up at me from under thick brows. "I don't do anything serious, Darcy."

I drink in the sound of my name from his lips and plop down next to the bottle. I need wine.

Apparently he can read minds, too, because he hands me a corkscrew and two stemless glasses. I pour as he unwraps the sandwiches. I hand him his glass and he hands me a sandwich.

"The bread is gluten-free," he says.

My eyes go wide. "You remembered!" The next words out of my mouth are almost 'I love you'. I manage to hold them back, but just barely. Instead I lean up against the tree, scrutinizing the sandwich. "I have to drive all the way downtown to get my gluten-free bread. I don't suppose you had this just lying around?"

He gives me a sly smile. "Nope."

"What happened to not having enough time to leave the job?"

He shrugs. "I called in a favor."

I bite into the sandwich. It's perfect. Although I chew and swallow as quietly as possible, as far as eating on the first date, I'm not too stressed about it. There are too many other things to worry about—like falling to my death.

"What about today?" I ask. "Did you call in another favor to get time off?"

"Not quite."

I wipe off my hands, fold my legs under me and lay my sandwich down, indicating I want to hear more.

"I snuck out."

I laugh out loud, my voice carried off by the wind, vanishing amidst the treetops.

"Well," I hold up my glass. "Cheers to favors and sneaking out."

"And biologists," he adds, wiggling his own glass in the air.

I sigh. "And biologists."

Our glasses clink together.

Tangy and sweet flavors roll around my mouth and slide down my throat, and I finish the rest of the glass before I pick up my sandwich again.

"Slow down there, we're not even halfway through the course yet."

"Exactly why I need more," I say, filling my glass again. Sipping a bit more cautiously, we sit in silence while we finish our lunch.

Breathing in the earthy scents of the forest, I am finally able to relax. I don’t even flinch when the tree we are on sways with the stronger gusts. The sun changes course in the sky. Falling from its peak, rays filter through waving leaves and warmth blooms over our faces. I close my eyes, leaning my head back against rough bark.

I hear Colin do the same behind me, and soon his hand slides over my own. His palm is as scratchy and course as the tree at my back, and I find myself leaning into them both.

In the next tree over, a bird chirps, shrill and loud. I jerk upright, flinging my eyes open. I have to take it as a warning before this goes any further. "Sarah saw something at the bowling alley that night—in the bathroom."

I feel Colin's hand tighten over my own.

"She has nightmares about it. She can't get it out of her head." I take a deep breath and turn to Colin. "What was it?"

He pulls his hand away and scratches the back of his neck. "How should I know? I wasn't in there."

"It was *your* bowling alley—in the women's bathroom."

"The bowling alley ain't mine. I just work there." His words turn clipped and short.

More warning signals go off in my head. I smash them quiet, determined to get to the bottom of this while I still can. "She says…she heard noises, then saw blood. But she was sure it was just one person in there with her. A man."

He shrugs. "There ain't never any women in the alley. We use both bathrooms as our own."

"And the blood?" I ask, exasperated.

He shakes his head, gets to his knees, and starts packing up the basket. Nudging my legs aside, he pulls the blanket out from under me.

Anger level rising just as much as his, I swoop the wine bottle from his reach before he can get to it. Pouring what's left of it into my glass, I give him a stern look. "I'm in graduate school—a nursing program. This is my last year, I only have finals to get through. I have no family. That…Pontiac is the only thing my dad left behind after he send me off to college." My voice cracks and I can see Colin's eyes softening.

"The point is," I continue, "Human welfare is my chosen occupation in life. And I can't just let this go. For Sarah's sake and for whoever else was in there, obviously having a major issue. And I have time, and nothing holding me back. I…just can't let this go," I say again.

There, it's been said. I take a long, congratulatory drink, finishing the rest of the wine. Finally, I turn to Colin ready for whatever he is going to bring.

It isn't what I expect.

Chapter Five

Wrapping his hands around the harness at my chest, he pulls me to my feet. He puts his forehead against mine, his eyes squeezed shut as if he is in pain. "You should let it go," he whispers. "We both should." He looks at me, one eyebrow raised in question.

I fold my palms around his thick forearms. "I don't want to," I whisper back.

"Then you are as crazy as I am."

I don't even have time to register his words before his lips are pressing into mine.

I freeze, eyes wide.

What the hell am I doing?

But Colin is insistent, and slowly, I melt into him. He is as sturdy as the tree that holds us. Two hundred feet above ground, in the middle of a wild forest, he is my freedom and my life line all at once.

His teeth graze my lips. I lean my head back as I feel sharp points moving down my chin and over the pulse in my neck. His arms are wrapped around me tighter than the harness.

When he steps forward I step back, knocking over the empty wine bottle. It rolls along the wooden platform, then disappears over the edge. The crash below is muted, thick foliage hiding the evidence of our pleasures.

We stop, both peering over the ledge. I giggle, then tilt over.

"Whoa," he pulls me back from the ledge.

My head sways from the height, and the drink, but mostly from the kiss.

"I think we better wait a bit before we finish the course, sweetheart," he says. "I brought water." He opens up the thermos.

"Water is good," I say, giggling again.

He sits up against the tree, pulling me down with him. Limbs wrapped around each other, we sip water sometimes talking, sometimes kissing.

Eventually, he opens up about his life. "A group of us live in a trailer park."

"I remember passing one on my way here," I say.

"Yeah well, we live in the trailer park, we walk the forest, and we either work or play at the bowlin' alley. That is about it. We don't leave, and outsiders are rarely allowed in."

"What are you—a cult?"

"I suppose, of sorts. Not religious or nothin' like that. Just…" he trails off. A few minutes later he speaks. "We aren't allowed to leave."

"Because of the rules? Because of that guy I saw at the bowling alley? Alaric, I think."

"He makes the rules, but…it's just…we *can't* leave. It's a thing."

"Try not to be too specific," I say.

"It's hard to explain," he mumbles. "But that's why we shouldn't do this."

"So why did you invite me?"

My head is leaning against the side of his cheek, and I can feel him smile. "Because Alaric told me not to."

A few moments of silence pass.

"Why are you here, after what Sarah saw?" Colin asks.

"I suppose because Sarah told me not to."

The rumble of his laugh moves from his chest into mine, and we kiss again.

"So you'll maybe come back?" he asks.

"Maybe," I say, a playful tone to my voice.

"How about I tell you not to, just to make sure you will?"

Our lips graze each other as he talks.

"I think that would do it," I whisper back. The alcohol is gone from my system by now and the sun has dropped so far from the sky its light no longer warms us.

I shiver, and he wraps his arms around me while his gaze goes to the sky. "It's startin' to get dark. I've lost track of time." Colin untangles himself from me and begins collecting the rest of the gear. "Do you know where the thermos lid is?" he asks.

"Oh, um—I put it over here I think." Careful to stay away from the ledge, I feel my way around the platform. There is almost no light anymore; full darkness is creeping up on us.

"Leave it," he says, a sense of urgency edging his tone. "I can come get everythin' tomorrow. We need to get goin'. Put your gloves back on."

There is another slow scramble session with both of us on our knees trying to find our gloves. I make sure my phone and my keys are still in my pocket while Colin checks and rechecks our harnesses, clips, and the ropes.

"Do you smell that?" Colin asks with an abrupt stop to his safety inspection.

"Smell what?" I ask, backing up to feel the solid tree against me.

He walks to the ledge and looks down. Not long after we can hear the faint rustling of bushes and plants down below.

"An animal?" I ask, stepping forward to look.

He puts a silent hand up, motioning me to stop. Under the strengthening rays of the moon, I watch as he puts one finger to his lips. "Shhh," he whispers.

The rustling gets closer and closer until it is just under our platform. I can't help myself—I have to know. I drop to my knees and crawl forward until I can peer over. What could it be? A gang of squirrels?

But the shadows I see are much larger than any squirrel would cast. My next guess is bears, but they are way too slender. Wolves would move in a pack, but I can tell these creatures walk on two legs, not four.

Humans?

I squint, willing my eyes to focus further. There are a least a dozen separate figures moving through the forest. I see flashes of color. Red, gold, purple. And every once in a while a flickering glow, like fireflies are buzzing around their heads.

"Ow!" One of them exclaims, directly underneath the platform.

"What is it?" We hear the rest of them converging below us.

There is a pause, and I glance at Colin. He remains stalk still…almost as if he is too scared to move.

"Glass. It cut me on the bottom of my foot."

"Can you keep walking?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's continue on, and you can see the healer as soon as we get back."

"As you say."

The rustling starts up again. Silently, we watch and listen as the entire group moves beneath us, then toward the beginning of the rope course. When I think its safe, I stand up next to Colin. "Who were they?" I ask.

"No one we want to run into right now," he whispers.

"There you go, being all specific again."

"Darcy, I need you to listen to me and just trust me. We need to finish this course quiet and quick. Can you do that?"

I nod.

"We'll be fine," Colin says. It almost sounds as if he is reassuring himself, not me. Looking in the direction the group of people disappeared, then up to the sky, he shakes his head. "At least it isn't a full moon."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Colin freezes. Even in the dark I can see his shoulders hunching. Finally, he half turns toward me. "If there was a full moon, it would mean more light," he says. "And they might be able to see us. We wouldn't be able to slip away."

"But why do we need to slip away? Who were they?" I fumble for the phone in my pocket which is wedged tight against my body from the harness. Putting the screen up to my face, I sigh. Out of battery.

"I'm goin' first," he says. "Its more dangerous in the dark because you can't see the end very well. I'll whistle for you to go, and I'll whistle again when you should start slowing down. Three short tones—it'll sound like a bird. Got it?"

"Got it," I say.

"I'm going to leave this with you, just in case." He slips a sheathed knife inside my harness.

"Okay," I say, without asking 'in case of what'. It is the same I did with dad—I let him prepare me for the worst just because it made him feel better. "Be careful." I step back to give him room.

He nods, then pushes off the ledge. The rope we are both connected to sags with his weight. I keep a tight grip on it, reassured by the movement he makes.

After about twenty seconds pass, the rope lets up which means his weight is now on the next platform. I wait for his go ahead. A full minute passes and the whistles don't come.

Another minute passes while I strain my ears in his direction. There is a hooting owl behind us, and a slight breeze blowing needles, leaves, and branches all around us. But other than that—nothing.

I tug on the rope, forcing it to jump up and down, trying to convey my impatience which has all but run out. Waiting until I'm sure five full

minutes have passed, I check my harness and clips. I step to the ledge and count to thirty, listening for his call.

Silence.

Finally, I take a deep breath, and launch myself into the darkness.

Chapter Six

Zip lining at night is a whole different experience. Extended tree limbs come out of nowhere as if they are making a grab at me while I pass. I keep my legs pulled into my chest until my midsection aches with the strain. My arms are tense, ready to squeeze the brake on a moments notice in case the next platform suddenly appears before me.

The ride lasts forever, tension mounting as each second goes by. Movement below calls for my attention. I think I see the fireflies, but I keep my eyes pinned in front of me for the next platform. Finally, something solid forms out of the darkness—it has to be the next tree. I pull my feet up in preparation and slow down. My timing is good. I come to a stop right above the platform, but when I put my feet down I stumble over something lumpy. Catching myself on the tree, I turn, feeling with my hands. A body.

"Colin! Oh my god, please tell me you're alive."

He doesn't tell me anything—he is unconscious. I verify his pulse and his breathing is normal then I gently prod his body for injuries. Sticky liquid is matted against his head. He has a nasty cut, probably from running into the tree—which also means a possible concussion.

"Damnit, damnit, damnit." I feel his pockets but find no phone and mine is dead. Sitting back on my heels I press my fists into my eyes. "Think, Darcy."

Take a deep breath. What are your options?

1. Sit here until daylight, use each other's body heat to keep warm, and hope someone comes along. *But there is no guarantee anyone ever will, and Colin has already lost too much blood.*

2. Leave him here, hike out, and get help. *What if he stops breathing? What if he rolls off the platform with the rope wrapped around his neck? No—it is best to keep him with me.*

3. Keep him with me. *I have to—he would do it for me.*

I try to recall my emergency preparedness class and the improvised pulleys and stretchers we had to construct. The forest offers plenty of materials to work with, I am smart, and I am not really drunk. I can do this.

Unhooking the loops of extra rope Colin has at his side, I find two long lengths to work with. I secure one of them around the back of his harness. Then I throw the other end around the tree.

"Okay, buddy. Get ready for the ride of your life that you'll hopefully never remember." I throw his legs off the ledge so they dangle in the air.

Making sure I have a tight grip on the rope, I put my heels into Colin's shoulders and begin to push him toward the edge, inch by inch. His waist slides over, and the rest of Colin follows.

Holding on for Colin's dear life, the rope goes taut and I am jerked forward. But I dig into the platform and stabilize the line while Colin sways in open air beneath me. "This is probably the worst idea I've ever had," I mumble.

One hand releases the rope and quickly grabs on further back, lowering Colin just a bit. "No—the worst idea I've ever had is coming out here today."

I release and hold again, then again. Hand over hand, Colin is slowly lowered down. He may make it to solid ground by sunrise. "No—the worst idea I've ever had was going into that bowling alley."

Hand over hand.

"You hear that Colin? I nailed it. I never should've gone into your damn bowling alley." I don't care how loud I'm being. Hopefully it will attract somebody. Somebody that has more upper body strength than me.

Sweat prickles out of my forehead, down my back, and at the palms of my hands. The cool breeze in the treetops only sends cold chills down my spine. What am I lowering Colin into? A patch of briars? A pack of wolves? Once he is all the way down I am going to have to be quick to get myself down.

My arms have gone numb, though the hand over hand process is faster. I am singing a song in my head, forcing myself to keep up. Release on the upbeat, grab hold on the downbeat.

In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
Through the valley of fear
To a river so deep

My god, how far up are we? Am I lowering him into some sort of bottomless pit?

In the middle of the night
I go zip line in the trees
With an unconscious man
Who had me on my knees

I giggle. *Concentrate, Darcy. Remember? No longer drunk. Though that wine was good. I'm going to have to ask him where he got it, especially since none of them can leave*—the rope goes slack in my hands.

"Oh!" I stand up, dropping the rope, and walk to the ledge. Squinting into the dark, I think I can see his form slumped over on the ground. "Okay, you're up next, sweetheart." I giggle again, then brush it off as exhaustion.

My pulley system will be a bit more complicated since there is no one to lower me but me. I find the other rope, loop it around the tree and toss both loose ends over the platform. Facing the tree, I hold both sides of the rope together and straddle them. I pull them up past my hip, over my shoulder, around the back of my neck then down my other arm, praying to the almighty I was paying good enough attention in disaster preparedness class. The friction of the rope against my body should brake my descent.

Holding my breath (which I'm sure wasn't part of the class), I walk backward off the edge, one hand on the rope behind me and one on the rope in front of me. I let gravity take me.

It doesn't take me very far. I forget to allow the rope to feed through my hand behind me, which results in a sudden stop.

I let out the breath I've been holding, and try again. A few moments pass, and I have the hang of it. Bouncing against the tree with the balls of my feet as I descend, I expend all concentration on the regulation of how quickly the rope passes through my hands.

Rustling just behind me stops me short. I crane my neck around, and realize I am only a dozen feet off the ground. Colin still lies inert on the ground, but a bush next to him is disturbed, and I think I catch a glimpse of a firefly. "Who is there!" I demand more than ask.

The rope has a mind of its own, turning me back toward the tree. I kick uselessly into the air trying to turn myself to face the unknown threat. "I

said who is there!" I grunt, still kicking.

More rustling behind me, and shadows emerge from behind bushes and trees.

Chapter Seven

Assuming the shape of petite women, I am able to breath a bit better. How harmful could they be? More emerge until there are at least twenty, each with a basket on their arms. The rope is being extremely stubborn, forcing me to fight my way around to look at them.

Below, Colin stirs. The women drop their baskets and several actually take aim at him with bows and arrows.

Without hesitation, I unsheathe the knife Colin gave me and slice through both sides of the rope above me. Falling the rest of the way, I manage to land on my feet with some amount of grace. I hold the knife in front of me and yell. "Get back!"

The women hesitate, looking at each other for guidance.

I feel around with one foot until I find Colin. Slowly, I shift until I am standing directly over him. He is still unconscious, and I peg his movement as unfortunate timing.

"You are Ungainly," says one of them, stepping forward.

Moonlight hits her face, and I know she can't be of this world. My mouth drops open as I study the yellow glow of her skin, her sharply-angled cheekbones, and the scales that cover most of her body.

More step into the swath of light. They represent all the colors of the rainbow. Red, blue, purple—bright colors and earth tones, the scale is expansive. Their hair flickers with light.

"Wha-what are you?" I stammer, pointing my knife in each direction they stand.

The yellow one appears to be in charge, judging from the way she looks me up and down. So I settle on pointing the tip of my knife at her. "This man is injured—he needs help."

"This is no man. He is an enemy of ours." The creature cocks her head, as if judging for herself if I fall into the same category.

"Stop this banter, Sarafina," another one says. She sits on the ground nursing her foot which is oozing a tiny bit of blood. She must have been the one that stepped on the glass. "Expend with them both," she says. "She is obviously with him."

"That is right," I say. "I am with him. And if any of you harm a hair on his body, this one…" I point my knife at Sarafina. "Will not survive the night. I promise you that."

They all stare at me, and I am grateful for their inaction while I work to get my shaking under control.

"She is right," Sarafina says. "She is Ungainly, and if she is harmed or goes missing, there will only be more that follow. We cannot fight two battles at once."

Those holding bows and arrows lower their aim until tips are pointed at the ground, and I do the same with my knife.

Several of the women turn away, disappearing into the night. Sarafina is studying me again. "Do you know what he is?" she asks.

"I…" I trail off. Of course I suspect something, with the way he describes his cult, but I know I am nowhere close to putting my finger on it. Still, it is none of her business. "I will leave you to your battles, and you leave me to mine," I tell her.

I can't be sure with those thin lips and angled cheekbones, but I think she gives me a crooked smile. "As you say."

Sarafina turns to go, until a howl pierces the dark. Several more howls rise up in response.

"The wolves know we are here," Sarafina stares in horror at the direction of the noise. "Maidens—with me!"

The rainbow sorority vanishes as quickly as they materialized, leaving me and my unconscious boyfriend directly in the path of an approaching wolf pack.

"What sort of fresh hell is next?" I mumble.

I know they are moving fast, crashing through the jungle and sounding more like elephants than wolves. I need more protection—animals cannot be reasoned with, not like…the aliens I just met. Quickly, I paw at Colin's body. I find one more knife and shorter lengths of rope. I wrap the rope around my forearms and secure it. Hopefully it will protect me from bites. As an afterthought, I wrap another length of rope around my neck. Never thought I'd be doing that in the name of self-preservation.

Just as the first wolf bounds into the clearing, I crouch in a fighting stance directly over Colin, holding up both knifes. Growling, the wolf shoots right by us in pursuit of the women. He is followed by several more

who do the same. I stay deadly still, the pulse in my neck pressing against the rope that by now I realize I may have wrapped too tightly.

An entire horde passes through and just as I think I might survive this, a straggler lopes into view, pausing directly in front of me. My eyes go wide, and my entire body buzzes with too much adrenaline. He doesn't see me. Panting hard, he whines a bit in the direction of the rest of his brethren.

I am a statue. I am a statue. I…why didn't I just go to the library today?

By now Sarah will be worried. She would have discovered I was never in the library and probably deduced the only place I would go for relief after midterms. She might come this way herself, or send someone else looking for me. What if they run into the wolves or the aliens? All of this is my fault.

The wolf puts his nose to the ground and sniffs, turning in a full circle. He finds the small pool of blood left behind by the woman bleeding from her foot. She is probably leaving a trail for the wolves to follow. I hope they have some sanctuary close by. Tentatively, the wolf licks at the blood, then turns away in distaste. Watching him closely, I can't help but think how human-like the gesture is.

A few more stragglers walk into the clearing. At first starting to pass through, the lone wolf turns and yips at them. They all fall back. He is no slowpoke at all. He is simply running his own pack, in secret, it almost seems.

Watch out, National Geographic, I am—

My own thought is cut short as the lead wolf suddenly doubles over, growling and spitting.

Oh my god, is he a she? Is she giving birth?

It begins convulsing violently.

A seizure.

I almost move forward, all instincts want to push forward and help. But the other wolves are still in the clearing and they would view me as a threat toward the sick wolf.

Patches of dark beige appear alongside the back of the wolf. It is losing hair. The spindly light-brown needles float to the ground in a nest around it. More hair disappears from underneath and on its back legs, and the wolf rolls to his side.

It is definitely a 'he.'

His skin pitches and heaves, bones moving unnaturally beneath it. He throws up a pool of blood and I think of what Sarah saw in the bathroom.

Oh, Colin—what have you gotten me into?

I begin to shake, and the scene in front of me sways, pitching as violently as the wolf is. Gray creeps in from my peripherals.

Finally, the wolf calms, breathing as hard as I am. Slowly, he stands on two legs and he is no wolf at all. He is a man, as human as Colin.

As he rises, I fall. The night rushes forward and consumes me.

* * *

"Ow," I mumble, lips heavy and sticky with sleep. I reach for Sarah and find only empty bed beside me. Did she manage the night sleeping on her own? Maybe the nightmares are finally over.

But something is wrong with my bed. It is hard and the edge is far closer to me than it should be, on both sides. I force my eyes open, they feel as though they are filled with grain. I don't recognize the ceiling above me, and I know the nightmare has only just begun.

Chapter Eight

Lying still, I take stock of my body. I'm sore and bruised, but no major damage as far as I can tell. Next, I turn my head to survey the room. I am surrounded by musty smells and rickety walls.

I must be at Colin's trailer park.

Thick curtains are drawn over the windows, but on the opposite wall a door sways open then bangs shut with the breeze. It is still dark outside so I couldn't have been out that long.

Or maybe this is the next night, or the one after that.

I force myself to sit up, groaning. My head sways with pounding pain. Dragging my legs over until my feet touch cold tile floor, I fight back nausea and wonder if I have a concussion myself.

Someone would have had to take my shoes off. The thought jolts me from my stupor. I feel around. My harness is gone, too, but my clothes are all still on. A small table next to my cot holds my phone (still dead) and my car keys.

I stand, putting both in my pocket. I start toward the door, convincing myself I can find my way back to the Pontiac even though I only vaguely know where I am right now.

A snore stops me in my tracks. I peer further into the dark room and find someone sleeping on another cot. "Colin?"

Cautiously walking closer, I can see it is him. He snores again. I run to my cot, grab and ball up the thin sheet that was underneath me, and place it under is head. Should help with the snoring, of which I'm not sure is a by-product of a concussion or not. Gently, I prod his sticky head, locating a nasty laceration at his temple. Fresh blood oozes out.

"Shoot," I mumble. His wound needs attention—my Pontiac can wait. Feeling my way around the room, my surroundings slowly reveal themselves as my eyes adjust to the darkness. I can't find a switch or even a lamp, but there is at least a sink and a pile of clean, folded rags next to it. Rooting through the cupboards, I find antiseptic, gauzes, and medical tape.

"You've got yourself a regular ol' clinic here, Colin." They say sometimes speaking to those in a coma will bring them out of it, but I'm

probably just talking out loud for my own sake. "Now lets see what we can do about that cut."

I clean him up until only the gash remains. After studying it up close, I lean back and sigh.

"That bad, doc?"

I jump, turning toward an armchair in a far corner of the room. When I squint I can see someone sitting in it; someone who has been watching me the whole time.

An arm reaches over and a lamp flickers to life beside the chair, bathing the room in blessed, blessed light.

I recognize Alaric, the creepy one from the bowling alley. He leans forward, staring at me with his elbows in his knees. "I thought leaving the door open would make it fairly obvious. You are free to leave. Your type usually does."

I don't ask him what he means by 'my type'. I push it to the back of my head along with a billion other questions I have and try to focus on my patient. "Colin needs stitches. I'm aware of all of your…eccentricities about leaving, but stitches are fairly simple and I can do them myself."

Footsteps from a hallway approach. Another man enters the room, coughing into his hand.

I hesitate, looking him over. Judging from his pale demeanor and the coughs that shake his body, I assume he is harmless and turn back to Alaric. "Other than what I've already found, I just need thread and a small needle."

Alaric continues to look at me, his fingertips running along the arm of his chair.

Shifting on my feet, I glance at the cougher again. "And probably some more light, if it is available."

A few more moments of silence, and finally Alaric nods to the cougher. The sound of chest congestion follows him as he disappears back down the hallway.

"So…Colin bagged himself a doctor?" Alaric asks.

I pick up the rag and get to work cleaning some of the blood out of Colin's hair, trying to keep my cool. If I'm going to stitch anything, I need steady hands. "Colin hasn't *bagged* anything," I say without looking at Alaric. "And I'm in nursing—a student, actually. I graduate in a few months."

Alaric leans forward. "What is your name?"

"Darcy Aldrich," I say. "And yours?"

"Alaric,"

I already knew that. "Got a last name?"

"Werich. We're all Werich's here."

The cougher returns, bringing another man with him. Because this is looking more and more like their form of a clinic, I immediately assess the other man for his ailment. He is very thin, and looks extremely fatigued. A yellowish bruise covers the left side of his face. The men hand over a few supplies.

I pull up a side table, prep the few materials I have to work with and sterilize the needle. "I'm going to need your help," I tell bruise-face. "What is your name?"

"Zeke," he says.

"Please stand on the other side of Colin with these," I hand him some gauze. "Keep the area clean of blood, and whatever else comes out."

He nods and takes his place, without seeking consent from Alaric I'm pleased to see.

I turn to the cougher. "Can you find us some more light?" I lower my voice. "I swear you all must have built in night vision."

His cough turns into a choked strangle sort of noise, but he disappears back down the hallway quick enough.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, taking a moment to clear my head. Thankfully, the trailer remains silent. I can feel Alaric watching me from his corner like an animal stalking his prey. Needing to rid myself of the chills that creep over my shoulders, I take Colin's hand. It is warm; his pulse reassuring. He will be fine. A simple stitch job, a good night's sleep, and he will wake up with a pounding headache in the morning.

I open my eyes and look at the man sitting across from me. "You have aspirin?" I ask.

He nods.

"Good. Colin is going to need it when he wakes up." I take another deep breath and pick up the needle. "Okay, let's get started."

Chapter Nine

I've stitched up my fair share of patients, but it has always been under the supervision of a lead doctor or nurse. And never in a trailer, after having fainted, after having witnessed—

Concentrate, Darcy.

I move my chair so I am positioned right at his head. Tilting his face to the right, I lean over, holding my needle up. I start with the edge of the wound closest to me. Most of the skin directly around it will have become numb by now, so hopefully he won't feel any pain, even if he does wake up.

Inserting the needle, Zeke sucks in his breath. I push the point down through to the sub-dermal layer of skin. The tip levels off, following just over his open flesh to the adjacent wall of the wound. I push the needle through the layers of skin on the other side.

There is a lot of blood. I am trying to go deep enough so the thread won't tear through the skin. Zeke is doing a good job with the gauze.

"How long have you had those bruises?" I ask Zeke just as I have zigzagged my way to the halfway point. I've noticed a few bruises on his arms, too.

He glances in Alaric's direction before he answers. "A few weeks," he says.

"Seems a long time for bruising to be showing."

"I dunno," he mumbles.

I continue my work. "Have you been using the bathroom more than normal? Noticed any weight loss? Have blurry vision?"

He wipes Colin's laceration again, and I get the sense he is wondering how far my questioning will go.

Finally, he shrugs. "All of the above, actually. Though none of it serious."

I am nearing the end of my diagonal path, the bleeding already almost staunched. Zeke wipes the rest of it away while I tie a secure knot with the thread.

He hands me scissors, and I cut off the thread and disinfect the entire area once more. When I lean back to wipe my brow, Zeke leans forward,

inspecting my work. "He'll have a scar," he says. "But it probably won't even be noticeable in a few years."

Taking it as a compliment, I smile. "A few more incidents like that and he'll look more alien than those things we saw out there tonight."

All color drops from Zeke's face as quickly as Alaric shoots out of his chair.

"You saw the fish heads?" he asks.

I frown. "They didn't exactly look like—"

"What did they say to you?" Alaric is looming over me now, and I realize he wears a large black cape tied closed down the front. "What did you say to them?" he asks.

"What does it matter?" I stand up, my chair toppling to the floor behind me.

Alaric steps forward until his boots are almost on top of my tennis shoes. I feel the crook of his cold finger under my chin. He forces my head up until I look at him. "Just to be clear, you are on our side—or theirs," he stares me down with black eyes.

I swallow hard, but steel my nerves and stand up so we are nose to nose. "Just to be clear—the only side I'm on, is my own."

His jaw line juts out, tensing as he grits his teeth. Finally, he walks toward the door of the trailer and pulls it open. Spinning around, he points outside. "I think you should leave now, Mrs. Aldrich. And never come back."

I glance at Colin. His bleeding has stopped, and he will probably wake up in the morning with a headache, nothing more. "Fine," I shake my head as I walk toward the door.

But the sound of a cough stops me. In front of the open door, my way back to the Pontiac, and to my dorm, the library, and Sarah…I stop and turn around. I point at the one coughing. "This one needs an antibiotic to kill the infection settling in his lungs. He'll start wheezing within 24 hours, and soon after that will need serious medical intervention before his lungs close up all together. Your friend there," I point to Zeke, "is probably diabetic. He might need insulin but most likely the right diet will be enough. And Colin," I spin around, pointing to Alaric. "Might never wake again. And if he does, the cut on his forehead could become infected. So what happens to him, then? Or the next one that gets an infection. What happens when you get an infection, Alaric?"

I don't realize that I am almost nose to nose with Alaric until I stop talking. I am so close I can smell his acrid breath. "You need me, Alaric. And I will be back, to help them." I gesture to the rest of the men in the room.

"You must have a death wish, girl." His top lip curls up in a snarl.

"Let her go, Alaric." It is Colin, who is barely able to lift his head from the table. Eyes glassy, he does his best to return Alaric's heated gaze.

Zeke stands up from the table behind Colin. "Let her go, and let her return."

Next the cougher, who is loitering in the hallway, steps forward. "I agree with them, Alaric. We do need her. Otherwise you lose us one by one."

I glance at Colin with a pained look. I should stay and question him, see how he feels, assess his cognitive functions. But I get the feeling I overstayed my welcome the minute I walked into the camp. "And Colin remains unpunished." It is my final demand, and one I know I cannot leave unspoken.

Alaric paces the room, rubbing at the stubble on his chin in agitation. Finally, he stops in front of me. "Fine. Leave. Go get your medicines and you may return to treat my men." He steps back, laying a hand on Colin's chest. "But if you tell anyone about what you saw here tonight…if I get any more unexpected visitors…it is Colin that will pay."

I try looking at Colin, but his expression is blocked by Alaric's cape. I'm not used to gambling with other people's lives, but it is the best I can do, and at least I can walk away with my own.

I turn my back on Colin and exit the trailer. When my feet hit the rocky ground, I look to find Alaric still watching me. "I'd like an escort to my car," I say. "Those women, or…whoever they were, weren't exactly friendly toward me."

"I'll take her," a voice calls out from my right.

A man steps from the shadows. I glance at Alaric for confirmation, but he is already slamming the door shut. My last glimpse is Colin's chest, rising up and down.

I turn back toward my escort, looking him up and down. He is young, very big, and a bit familiar. Fog left over from my brief period of unconsciousness lifts, and I remember where I've seen him before. The

animal in the clearing, who in one heartbeat was a wolf, and in the next—a man.

"I'm Liam," he sticks out his hand.

I shake it, mouth dry. "Darcy," I say.

Chapter Ten

"This way," wearing the same sort of cape as Alaric, Liam gestures with his arm, directly into the dark forest.

Needless to say, I don't follow. I stay right where I am, safe amidst the dilapidated trailers of strange men.

Liam looks at me, one eyebrow raised, waiting. When I still don't move, he drops his arm to his side and sighs. "Look, I ain't goin' to hurt you, but there are other things out there that can and will."

"Exactly," I say. "And what if you somehow go unconscious like Colin did. Am I expected to drag another one of you around tonight?"

Liam scratches the back of his neck, looks into the woods, then back at me. Finally, he pulls back his cape.

I turn before my not-so-virgin eyes are soiled.

"Here," he says.

Cold metal touches my shoulder and I flinch, jumping away. He holds out a long dagger, flipping it around in his hand so the handle faces me. "Take it, if it makes you feel better."

I take it, but feel no better. "I'd probably be overpowered before I even got a chance to use this."

"Do you want to go home or not?" he asks, voice rising a pitch in exasperation.

"I want to live!" I match his tone.

"Well of course you're going to live—at least through tonight. If you don't Colin will kick my ass."

"Well that would be some consolation," I cross my arms, taking care not to cut myself with the dagger.

"You know what?" He puts his hands on his hips, gritting his teeth. "Wait here." Liam stalks back into the clinic trailer and the door slams shut behind him.

I wait outside, shifting from foot to foot, keeping the cold and exhaustion at bay as long as I can. The trailer park and the forest that surrounds it is eerily silent, and the gravel under my feet seems to clink together, echoing in the open space each time I move.

Voices from the trailer rise up in argument. I strain to detect Colin, but he must have fallen back asleep. It appears to be Alaric and Liam yelling about something. Finally, Liam stalks back outside. "Here—this is the best I can do. So if you still aren't willin' to walk out with me then I will just assign you a trailer right now."

I look down at the cold, metal piece he has shoved into my hand. It is a sleek, black semi-automatic pistol.

"Do you know how to use one of those?" he asks.

"Actually," I turn it over in my hands. "I do." I check to see that it is loaded. "Is it legal?"

"Of course not," he says, studying me.

I make sure the safety is on then shove the barrel inside my belt. It is a good fit. "Do you have one of your own?" I ask.

He purses his lips then shakes his head. "Don't like 'em." He steps around me, holding his arm out to the forest once again. "This way."

I follow, a bit more confidence weighing my steps. We walk for a long way in silence, trudging through the forest. I look up, trying to spot a platform on the zip line course. They either aren't there or it is too dark to see them anyway.

"Who taught you to use that?" Liam asks, motioning to the weapon at my hip.

"My dad," I say, my hand going to the reassurance by my side. Since the age of 12, he took me to the range weekly. It was our Sunday morning ritual. Some people went to church, I was quickly becoming the best shooter Ohio had.

I hate to admit how good it feels to have a pistol in my possession again, but it is as almost if my father is walking alongside me, keeping watch.

I clear my throat and shake my head before the tears come. "They were pretty quiet, those women. Could they sneak up on us?" I'm suddenly aware that crunching leaves and cracking twigs echo through the forest with every step I take.

"I'll smell them before they get here," he says.

I frown. "You didn't smell me, in that clearing. In fact, none of you knew I was even there…until I fainted," I mumble. *Some cop's daughter I am.*

He stops so abruptly that I almost run into the back of him. Then he turns around and smiles down at me. "You are covered in Colin's scent. It masks your human smell."

"Oh…" my cheeks grow hot.

"You said you were zip lining?"

I nod, probably too quickly.

He snorts, then continues walking.

"So… " I push branches aside, hesitating to ask my next question. I'm not sure I really want to know the answer. "What did Alaric mean when he told me he'd thought I'd leave and that *they* usually do?"

"You ain't the first woman I've escorted out of camp." He pauses to look back at me. "But you are the first that Colin has brought in."

"You mean like…"

"Prostitutes, one-night stands, would-be girlfriends. They all go."

"Because… they saw what I saw?"

Now he turns around, looming over me. "They go because Alaric makes them. No one sees what you saw, at least not that we know about." He puts a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Listen, Darcy. You have to keep this to yourself. For Colin's sake…for all our sake's."

I shake his hand off. "No one would believe me even if I did say anything, which I won't." I step around him. "I think I'm just going to go home, go to bed, and when I wake up I will be very well convinced this has all been a terrible nightmare."

"Probably for the best," he says, walking behind me. Every once in a while he'll turn my shoulders slightly right or left to redirect me. "Although…"

"What?" I turn to look at him.

"You're just different than the rest. I have a feelin' we ain't seen the last of you." He winks as he passes me, taking the lead once again.

"Would I be safe?" I ask. "If I came back to the trailer park to see Colin?"

Liam doesn't say anything, but his answer is obvious—I would be entering at my own risk. There is a slight pinch to his face, as though he feels guilty about it.

"How are old are you?" I ask.

The question catches him off guard, and he stumbles over a fallen branch. I reach out to catch him at the wrist and pull him back up.

"You've got a steady hand," he says.

"That's what the resident surgeon says, too."

"I'm the youngest one of us at the camp," he gives a rueful smile then turns to keep walking.

"Then how is it you feel responsible for everyone else? Some of them even look to you for guidance, it seems—even before they look to Alaric."

He sighs, shaking his head. "You already know too much for your own good," he mumbles. "What was Colin thinking?"

I stay silent, waiting to see if he'll open up. It doesn't take long.

"I'm the last one, so I do feel responsible. For some reason, no one came after me. Alaric feels the pressure; his kingdom is dwindling. Also, what you saw…me transforming like that."

"Yeah?" I don't even breathe for fear I might miss what he says next.

"That shouldn't happen unless the moon is full. For some reason, I can do it anytime."

"I saw more out there," I say. "They were all—hairy."

"Alaric gives them transfusions of my blood. Just so they can do that."

"Wha—?" I'm so appalled, I can't even finish the word.

Liam shrugs. "Like I said, he's desperate."

"Just, just—there are so many things wrong with that! Does he check blood types first? Does he sterilize the equipment?" I pull on Liam's arm, stopping him. "Does he even have your permission…or theirs?"

"Your ride is just up here," he says, shrugging out of my grasp.

"I have more questions." I push aside a clump of foliage a little too aggressively and half of it breaks off, tangling me up in it. "Damn it!"

Liam sighs, loud enough that I can hear it over my struggle with Mother Nature. I walk over to help, and by the time I am free of vines and branches the forest is brightening with the first rays of the sun. "Listen," he picks a leaf out of my hair. "My blood is my own problem. I'll stick to my affairs and you stick to yours."

Smoothing out my shirt, I laugh.

"What?" he asks.

"I said the same thing to those…women-alien things."

"You saw the maidens?" he asks, mouth dropping open.

I nod. "You call them maidens. Alaric calls them fish-heads. I call them the rainbow sorority. What exactly are they?"

Liam looks back toward the trailer park as though he might take off running for it any moment.

I put a brazen hand on his chest. "Liam—you can tell me now, or I can come back later asking."

Giving me a hard stare, his face going to stone, his jawline clenches then relaxes. "They are mermaids."

A half-laugh, half-snort is the first sound that escapes my lips. "Mermaids?" I think back to what I truly saw in the woods that night. Unnatural body types—thin waists, broad shoulders. Angled faces and sharp noses. And…scales.

"Mermaids," I say again, walking slowly toward my car. I can see its sea-green paint through the trees now.

"Alaric knows you saw them?" Liam asks as he escorts me into the clearing.

"Hm-mm," I nod.

"Does he know you saw me?"

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

"Let's keep it that way—I don't know what he would do if he finds out you know the full story."

"I *don't* know the full story, Liam." I take my keys out of my pocket, slipping one into my car door. The sound is reassuring. But before I can turn the key, I need to hear it. I want it spoken aloud.

I let go of the keys, letting them dangle from the car door, and turn and face Liam. "Soooo…werewolves, huh?"

He rubs at the stubble of his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Yep," he says finally. "Werewolves."

I hope you enjoyed delving into The Deep with the Painted Maidens! 'How I Met Your Mother' was intended to be a short story as an added bonus to the boxed set, but I am having so much fun writing it that Colin and Darcy may have their own book soon (or at least a novella).

Please check for updates at www.HarmonyLit.com, and let me know what you think of the series either by leaving a review on any major book site or by emailing me directly at terra.harmony11@gmail.com.

About the Author

Terra is author of the eco-fantasy novels in the Akasha Series, 'Water', 'Air', 'Fire' and 'Earth', as well as the Painted Maidens Trilogy. Terra was born and raised in Colorado but has since lived in California, Texas, Utah, North Carolina, and Virginia. Terra served a 5½ year enlistment in the Marine Corp, has earned her bachelor's and master's degree and presently runs the language services division of a small business.

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The Lost Locket of Lahari

Six of the Patchwork Press Authors, including Terra Harmony, have teamed up to create their first anthology!

In a dusty, dilapidated stall tucked away in an alcove of a bustling Bazaar in India, a man with a rickety spine and a spindly beard bends over his work bench, forging a locket with accidental magic. There's power in a wish, and there's nothing he wants more than for his children to return home. The locket was intricately crafted, adorned with one dragonfly for each of his children—and the power to find them.

With the guidance of fate, the locket skips through time and journeys across oceans, traveling from person to person in a constant search for the souls whispered into its vessel. Centuries after the magical old man in the Bazaar became near-forgotten myth and whispered legend, the locket has fallen into the hands of those with echoes of the six dragonflies: the seeker, the empath, the dreamer, the confidant, the adventurer, and the dancer.

In the hands of its new owners, the power of the locket adapts, bending and remaking itself to answer need. While the locket never found the children of Lahari, it found the next best thing… Their spirits.

The six novellas of the *Lost Locket of Lahari* anthology pause a moment in time when the locket finds the ripples of its ancestry. From the Victorian-era to the Roaring Twenties, the 1940s to modern day and beyond, this anthology is a collection of stories as dynamic as the authors themselves.